



The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

The Return of Inter-Bloc Rivalries,
or the Rise of Competitive Pluralization?

Edited by ISHIHARA Yusuke



Perspectives 4



The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

The Return of Inter-Bloc Rivalries,
or the Rise of Competitive Pluralization?

Edited by ISHIHARA Yusuke

NIDS

Perspectives 4

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Copyright © 2026 by the National Institute for Defense Studies.

All rights reserved.

First published 2026

By the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS)

5-1 Ichigaya Honmura-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-8808, Japan

NIDS URL: <https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/>

No part of this book may be reproduced or reprinted in any form without written, prior permission from the National Institute for Defense Studies.

This publication is an English translation of the original Japanese edition published in March 2026.

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads / edited by ISHIHARA Yusuke

ISBN: 978-4-86482-170-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Printed in Japan

by Urban Connections

Preface

The Indo-Pacific is often cast as the central stage on which the United States and China, two great powers of immense national strength, are vying for supremacy. This has led some observers to characterize the region as having a U.S.-China “bipolar structure.” This book, however, seeks to analyze international relations in the Indo-Pacific region from a broader conceptual perspective. We believe that international relations in the region cannot be adequately understood without also taking into account the conduct and influence of the region’s many other states more explicitly than is recognized by the bipolarity concept, a framework essentially grounded in Europe’s Cold War experience. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific today is more than just a setting for U.S.-China great-power rivalry and their jockeying for a position of superiority. Other states, too, are participating in this regional competition and shaping its contours as they pursue their own objectives, such as enhancing their autonomy, expanding their influence, promoting their prosperity, and safeguarding their security. This book conceptualizes the complex interplay of strategies and influence among the United States, China, and a host of other regional states in the Indo-Pacific as “competitive pluralization,” and analyzes its substance and implications.

There is, of course, no guarantee that the trend toward competitive pluralization will persist in the future. One Southeast Asian scholar with whom we exchanged views in preparing this book suggested that we could not rule out a scenario in which the United States and China act as “magnets” that attract other regional states and divide the region, to some degree, into two opposing blocs. This book therefore also considers the possibility of bloc formation and the indications of such a dynamic. If the region were indeed to divide up into blocs under a U.S.-China bipolar structure and pressure were to mount on other regional states to fall in line with the strategies of one great power or the other, those states would find their room for choice, influence, and autonomy considerably constrained. The book title, “The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads,” reflects these dual directions; while focusing on the trend of competitive pluralization, the book leaves open the possibility that, depending on the circumstances, the region may yet move toward bloc formation.

This book analyzes the competitive pluralization of the Indo-Pacific and presents key issues and concepts for understanding the region’s future trajectory through the following structure. The Introduction (ISHIHARA Yusuke) conceptualizes and fleshes out “competitive pluralization,” capturing the complex configuration of a contemporary Indo-Pacific that has not been fully cleaved into two U.S.-China

blocs. It sets out the research questions and analytical perspectives that underpin the country-specific analyses in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 1 (MAEDA Yuji) analyzes the current U.S. administration's America First policy, an important variable shaping the competitive pluralization of the Indo-Pacific region. This chapter highlights three defining features of America First as a foreign-policy orientation: a narrowing of geographic scope, a shortening of time horizons, and a distinctive conception of national interest driven by the pursuit of relative gains. It also points out that America First gained traction against the backdrop of a growing perception of relative U.S. decline, particularly from the 2000s through the 2010s, in which the rise of China was a contributing factor.

Chapter 2 (YAMAGUCHI Shinji) analyzes China's recent efforts to deepen ties with the "Global South." This chapter shows that China's intent is to "erode" U.S. hegemony, pointing out that Beijing has employed a range of policy instruments to develop relations with the states of the Global South, while also illuminating the constraints China faces. Chinese diplomacy of this kind has a dual character: it promotes bloc formation in international relations on the one hand, while simultaneously accelerating the pluralization of foreign policies among the states of the Global South.

Chapter 3 (ISHIHARA Yusuke) analyzes the factors driving the development of the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines "Squad," one of the minilateral frameworks Japan has actively promoted. This chapter demonstrates that, besides U.S. influence, which is often highlighted as the key driver of Squad, another important variable is the strategies of Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, together with the deepening and broadening sense of "like-mindedness" among the three. This dynamic is presented as a concrete instance of pluralization.

Chapter 4 (ISHIDA Tomonori) examines the Republic of Korea's (ROK's) Indo-Pacific policy. Conceptualizing the ROK's identity as that of a middle power, this chapter offers a detailed account of the distinctive features of the country's regional policy. The analysis illustrates how the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy continues to evolve within the strategic objective of maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and China, and considers the dilemmas the ROK faces as a player in an increasingly pluralized region.

Chapter 5 (SATAKE Tomohiko) analyzes Australia's response to competitive pluralization and the challenges it faces through two case studies: the recent Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership and Australian economic security policies. While maintaining the U.S.-Australia alliance and AUKUS, Australia is enhancing cooperation with partners such as Japan, striving

to secure strategic latitude amid deepening dependence on both the United States and China.

Chapter 6 (SHOJI Tomotaka) analyzes the hedging strategies of Southeast Asian states. In the post-Cold War period, Southeast Asian states drew major external powers into multilateral cooperation frameworks, established ASEAN centrality, and pursued a policy of hedging their relations with external powers through the institution of ASEAN. This chapter shows, however, that the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry has eroded the efficacy of such institutional hedging, and that, as a consequence, Southeast Asian modes of hedging have pluralized, with each state pursuing its own individual and divergent forms of hedging.

Chapter 7 (IZUYAMA Marie) analyzes India's multi-alignment. India advances multidirectional engagement at both the global and Indo-Pacific levels, but the character of its engagement at each level differs sharply. In the global context, India clearly emphasizes the advance of multipolarization and shows a willingness to participate in frameworks in which China is a key member. In the regional context, by contrast, its intent to counter China is often more evident. Through these analyses, the chapter paints a realistic picture of an India that is trying to find its place within the competitive pluralization.

This book is the product of a research project organized by the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) from 2024 to 2025. Throughout that period, we received valuable insights and constructive criticism from numerous researchers and practitioners both within and beyond NIDS. Solafune, Inc. conducted the opinion survey of Japanese and U.S. experts that informed our work. KIKUCHI Shigeo, Director of the Department of Policy Studies at NIDS, provided guidance throughout the project, and dedicated editorial work was conducted by other members of NIDS, namely Research Fellow YAMAGUCHI Akihiro and Research Fellow TSUJITA Yuki. The authors consist primarily of researchers affiliated with NIDS. In addition, Professor SATAKE Tomohiko of Aoyama Gakuin University kindly joined the project as a contributor, despite his demanding schedule. I wish to extend my sincere thanks to all.

The views expressed in this book represent the individual academic views of each contributor. They do not represent the views of NIDS, which organized the project.

ISHIHARA Yusuke

Senior Fellow, Defense Policy Division, Department of Policy Studies,
National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan

June 2026

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	i
----------------------	---

Introduction

The Competitive Pluralization in the Indo-Pacific

Its Structure and Future Scenarios

<i>ISHIHARA Yūsuke</i>	1
------------------------------	---

Column

A Receding U.S.-China Rivalry as a Conceptual Game Changer	27
--	----

Chapter 1

The America First Conception of National Interest

U.S. Self-Perception of Power and Foreign Policy in the Post-Unipolar World

<i>MAEDA Yūji</i>	29
-------------------------	----

Column

America First and Realism	60
---------------------------------	----

Chapter 2

The Development of China's Global South Diplomacy and Great Power Rivalry

<i>YAMAGUCHI Shinji</i>	63
-------------------------------	----

Chapter 3

The Evolution of the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines “Squad”

Reconsidering the Concept of Like-Minded Partners

ISHIHARA Yusuke 91

Chapter 4

The Republic of Korea: Finding Its Footing in the Indo-Pacific

ISHIDA Tomonori 133

Chapter 5

Competitive Pluralization and Australia

AUKUS and Economic Security

SATAKE Tomohiko 159

Chapter 6

The Pluralization and Diversification of Security Cooperation

Variations of Hedging among Southeast Asian States

SHOJI Tomotaka 185

Chapter 7

India’s Multi-Alignment

Choosing a Multipolar World or Partnering with Like-Minded Countries?

IZUYAMA Marie 221

Index 246

Editor and Contributors 251



The Competitive Pluralization in the Indo-Pacific

Its Structure and Future Scenarios

ISHIHARA Yusuke

Diverse states, both small and large, are engaged in competition across the Indo-Pacific.
This region is not a mere “chessboard” on which only the United States and China play.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

That U.S.-China relations lie at the heart of many discussions of the Indo-Pacific's international relations requires little elaboration. Particularly in the last five years, alarm has been raised regarding the trajectory of this relationship, including conflict scenarios involving a Taiwan contingency.¹ International relations scholars have long argued that when two great powers of such magnitude engage in rivalry and competition, interstate relations tend to reorganize around two opposing blocs (groups of states), and the overall structure gravitates toward a bipolar bloc division.² Unlike multipolar competition involving numerous great powers, which tends to be complex and difficult to manage, many scholars assert or assume that bipolar rivalry centered on two great powers produces a more durable structure: the situation is easier to assess and the calculation of power more straightforward.³ In a bipolar structure, states seeking security against Power A have no option but to align with Power B, the only other great power capable of offering a counterweight. Meanwhile, security against Power B similarly requires alignment with Power A. This dynamic reinforces the influence of both powers within their respective blocs.⁴ These arguments draw heavily on the Cold War European experience, in which the U.S.-led Western bloc and the Soviet-led Eastern bloc stood in sharp confrontation. Indeed, the development of the bipolarity concept in international relations was itself fundamentally informed by the empirical experience of the Cold War, particularly from the Western perspective.⁵

-
- 1) Bonnie S. Glaser, ed., "If China Attacks Taiwan: The Consequences for China of 'Minor Conflict' and 'Major War' Scenarios," Insights, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), December 2025; Hugh White, "Why War in Asia Remains Thinkable," *Survival*, Vol. 50, No. 6 (2008), 85–104.
 - 2) See, for example, Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Random House, 1985), 360–367. Robert A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1957), 36. Critiques of the widespread notion that a bipolar structure leads to inter-bloc rivalry have long existed. See, for example, Peter J. Fless, *Thucydides and Politics of Bipolarity* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 85–86. For a more recent example of the same argument, see Cliff Kupchan, "Bipolarity is Back: Why It Matters," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, Issue 4 (September 2021), 123–139.
 - 3) Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1979), 167–168.
 - 4) George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Independence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 12–15.
 - 5) Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Summer 1964), 881–909. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). The author is thankful to all the participants in the 10–11 June workshop jointly hosted by Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies and National Institute for Defense Studies in Tokyo including Professor Tunsjø for their insights.

To date, however, the restructuring of international relations in the Indo-Pacific does not appear to have followed the theoretically predicted path of bipolar bloc formation. How can this be explained? This book is a collaborative study that seeks to address this question by examining what it terms “competitive pluralization.” This is a process in which not only the United States and China, but also many other regional states, exercise influence grounded in their own distinct strategies and engage in interstate competition across the Indo-Pacific. In effect, the competitive pluralization renders the regional landscape more complex than a simple bipolar bloc rivalry. This introductory chapter clarifies the key concepts and presents the analytical framework that informs the book as a whole.

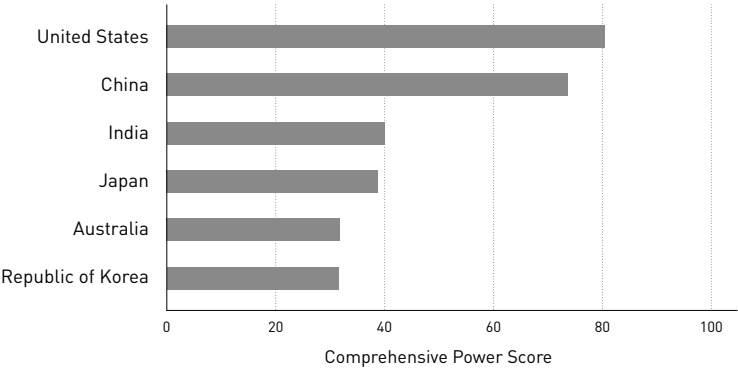
The chapter is organized into three sections. Section 1 observes that while factors conducive to bloc formation certainly exist in the contemporary Indo-Pacific, a clear pattern of inter-bloc rivalry has not yet emerged. Section 2 conceptualizes as the “competitive pluralization” those dynamics of Indo-Pacific international relations that cannot be fully captured by a framework of inter-bloc rivalry, and examines their substance. Section 3 builds on this analysis to discuss the variables that will determine, to varying degrees, whether the Indo-Pacific moves toward a re-emergence of blocs or whether the trend of “competitive pluralization” continues.

1 Signs and Constraints of Bloc Formation in the Indo-Pacific

In discussions of Indo-Pacific international relations, U.S.-China rivalry often serves as an almost self-evident starting point for analysis. This is hardly surprising given the magnitude of both countries’ weight in the region. The material strength of the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific is in a class of its own. The Lowy Institute’s annual “Asia Power Index,” quantifies the overall “national power” of states primarily through material indicators. According to this index, the United States and China clearly surpass all other states in terms of national power.⁶ A comparison of nominal GDP reinforces that the two countries occupy a preeminent position.

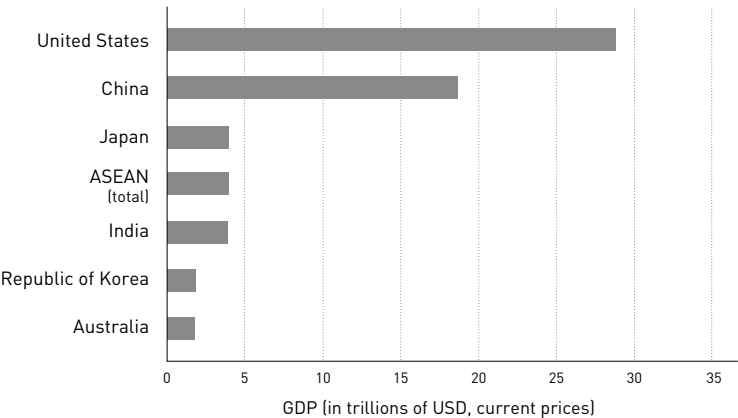
6) Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2025 Edition, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/> (accessed on January 21, 2026).

Figure 1. Power Scores Based on the Asia Power Index



Source: Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index, 2025 edition.

Figure 2. Nominal GDP



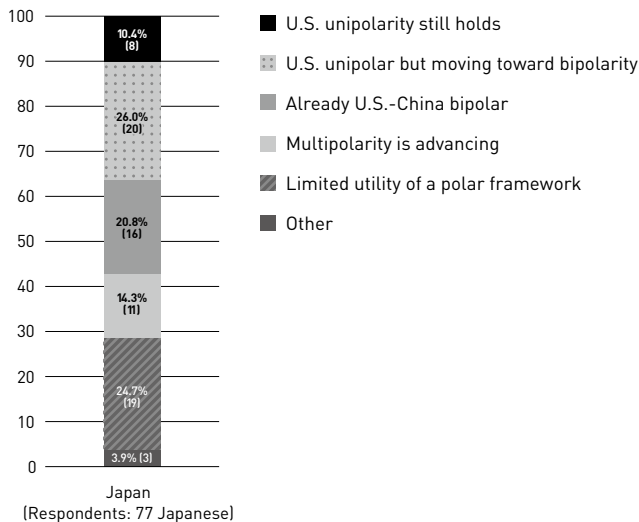
Source: World Bank database, 2024.

These realities have led some analysts to characterize the Indo-Pacific as a “bipolar” structure. As used in this context, the term “pole” refers primarily to great powers capable of exercising meaningful influence over the balance of power among states in a way that prevents the emergence of a dominant state.⁷ In the post-Cold War world, and especially in East

7) Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 129–160.

Asia (where the term “Indo-Pacific” was initially rarely used), it was argued that the United States had emerged as the sole superpower, giving rise to a “unipolar” structure against which balancing was impossible or at least extremely difficult.⁸ As the U.S. recognized that China had risen to the status of a “peer competitor,” arguments emerged that the structure had started transitioning to bipolarity.⁹ An opinion survey conducted by the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) among Japanese experts found that nearly half of respondents believed the Indo-Pacific to have already become bipolar or to be moving in that direction.

Figure 3. Assessment of U.S. Power in the Indo-Pacific



Source: Solafune, Inc., “Final Report: Commissioned Services for the Management of Surveys and Study Groups on International Relations and Security in the Indo-Pacific (Including Potentially New Domains)” (December 17, 2025).

- 8) William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), 9; Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 9) Jennifer Lind, “Back to Bipolarity: How China’s Rise Transformed the Balance of Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Fall 2024), 7–55. For an analysis of bipolarity with a focus on Asia rather than the world as a whole, see Susannah Patton and Hervé Lemahieu, “Asia Has No Hegemon: But U.S.-Chinese Bipolarity Is Good for America and the Region,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 13, 2024., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/asia-has-no-hegemon> (accessed on February 27, 2026). Øystein Tunsjø usefully points out that the Cold War conception of bipolarity cannot simply be applied to the international relations of the Asia-Pacific.

Characterizing the Indo-Pacific as “bipolar” has some analytical utility: it ensures that observers would not underestimate the outstanding material strengths of these two states and the structural significance of their interactions. As a general framework for broadly analyzing the region’s international relations, however, it falls short. International relations theory holds that a “bipolar structure” generates strong pressure to divide the entire international system into two blocs.¹⁰ Drawing on the Cold War analogy from which this term gained currency, this book defines a bloc as a group of states characterized by three features: first, increasing institutional cohesion of mutual cooperation among member states within the group; second, a scarcity of interactions aimed at coordination or coexistence between opposing groups; and third, the presence of a dominant leading state that anchors the group. In early Cold War Europe, for example, the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (the Western bloc) and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact (the Eastern bloc) stood in sharp confrontation. This resulted in a state of division, where security dialogue between the two blocs remained extremely sparse particularly in the first half of the Cold War. In addition, both blocs maintained institutional economic cohesion, through the U.S.-led Bretton Woods system and the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) respectively, and economic relations between the two were subject to severe constraints.¹¹

Measured against these criteria, namely, (1) institutional cohesion within blocs, (2) the absence of inter-bloc interactions, and (3) the presence of leading states—how far has bloc formation progressed toward a U.S.-China “bipolar structure” in today’s Indo-Pacific? While certain signs of bloc formation are discernible, this book posits that the region has not, at least thus far, reached the point of as parsimonious a bipolar structure as the theory, along with the Cold War analogy, posits. On the contrary, dynamics of “pluralization” that run counter to bloc formation have become increasingly prominent. The following is an analysis of Indo-Pacific international relations in accordance with each of the three criteria of bloc formation.

10) See notes 2, 3, and 4.

11) It should be noted that, theoretical models aside, the actual history of the Cold War in Europe should not be understood in a manner that overly emphasizes the primacy of the United States and the Soviet Union. For more on this, see Hosoya Yuichi, *Sengo kokusai chitsujō to Igirisu gaiko: Sengo Yōroppa no keisei 1945-nen kara 1951-nen* [British Diplomacy and International Order: The Making of Post-War Europe 1945-1951] (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 2001).

(1) Institutional Cohesion within Blocs

As the Sino-U.S. rivalry expands, both great powers have worked to build an array of competitive frameworks aimed at drawing regional states in the Indo-Pacific to their respective sides. Through BRICS, launched in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, and China (designated as BRIC at its founding), China has continued to advocate for the “multipolarization” of international politics and the “reform of global governance,” presenting these assertions as implicit alternatives to the United States’ dominance.¹² The ongoing expansion of BRICS membership, exemplified by Indonesia’s formal accession in January 2025, reflects this sustained effort on China’s part.¹³ Chapter 2 of this book analyzes China’s intentions in pursuing BRICS expansion, arguing that China seeks to extend its influence over the nations of the “Global South,” position itself as their leading state, and ultimately build frameworks of cooperation useful for undermining the United States’ hegemony. A similar intent can be discerned in China’s efforts to develop and expand the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In 2025, China simultaneously hosted a major summit attended by the leaders of numerous SCO member states and observer and dialogue partners, alongside a military parade commemorating the 80th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War, which was reviewed by General Secretary Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation, and the leaders of many SCO-affiliated states. On that occasion, China unveiled various weapon systems, including its latest intercontinental ballistic missiles and AI-enabled unmanned assets that have

12) “Xi Underscores BRICS’ Role in Building Multipolar World, Driving Globalization,” The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, October 23, 2024., https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202410/23/content_WS6718cea1c6d0868f4e8ec36c.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

13) “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on Indonesia Becoming a Full Member of BRICS,” January 6, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202501/t20250106_11527794.html (accessed on January 31, 2026); Takahashi Tomoko, “Chugoku no sentaku: BRICS kakudai ni miru Chugoku no gaiko senryaku” [China’s Strategic Choice: Beijing’s Foreign Policy through BRICS Expansion], *IDE Square*, Institute of Developing Economics (May 2025), https://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/IDEsquare/Eyes/2025/ISQ202520_011.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

been regarded as instruments of competition against the United States.¹⁴

The United States and its allies have also deepened cooperation with allied and partner states in recent years. Viewed through the lens of balancing against China, some analyses suggest a growing possibility of this contributing to movement toward bloc formation.¹⁵ The transformation of the “hub-and-spokes” system, in which Asian regional states are linked to the United States through bilateral alliance treaties, has long been a subject of debate. In recent years, new cooperation networks have developed rapidly through minilateralism (cooperation among small groups of states, generally three to five in number), including the Japan-U.S.-Republic of Korea trilateral, the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines quadrilateral, and AUKUS, the U.S.-U.K.-Australia security partnership.¹⁶ Chapters 3 and 5 of this book highlight how these minilateral arrangements have advanced not only in “non-traditional security” fields such as disaster relief and counterpiracy, but also in capability-building support and intelligence cooperation amid China’s increasing activities in the context of maritime security in the South China Sea and East China Sea. They further document progress in the mutual cooperation and integration of defense industries, and in technological and industrial domains including the operational use of nuclear-powered attack submarines and quantum computers for security purposes. In sum, viewed through the lens of institutional cohesion within blocs, one can argue that these observable signs of bloc formation do exist in the Indo-Pacific region.

On the whole, however, Indo-Pacific international relations cannot yet be reduced to a parsimonious framework of inter-bloc rivalry. It must be asked whether China’s attempt to lead the Global South for the purpose of undermining U.S. hegemony has been effective, a question to which the answer does not seem to be a full yes. Rather than increasing institutional cohesion of cooperation between China and its partner states, frequent lapses in coordination are observed. For instance, Indian Prime Minister Narendra

14) Sugiura Yasuyuki, “Chugoku Jinmin Kaiho-gun no ‘senryakuteki ikaku’ no tenkai: ‘Ko-Nichi senso: Sekai han-fashizumu senso shori 80 shunen’ kinen gunji pare-do no bunseki wo chushin ni” [The Development of the PLA’s “Strategic Intimidation”: Focusing on an Analysis of the Military Parade Commemorating the “80th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War”], *NIDS Commentary*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/commentary/commentary405.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

15) Aaron L. Friedberg, “A World of Blocs,” *The Marshall Papers*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 6, 2023.

16) See the individual contributions in the special issue “Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific,” *Kokusai Anzen Hoshō* [Journal of International Security], Vol. 53, No. 2 (October 2025).

Modi declined to attend the aforementioned review of the military parade, an occasion intended to emphasize solidarity among participating states, publicly citing consideration for Japan as the reason.¹⁷ In June 2025, India again pushed back against the content of an SCO joint statement, leading to a delay in its issuance and underscoring the framework's constraints.¹⁸ When South Africa hosted a BRICS maritime exercise in January 2026, India once again did not participate. (Chapter 7 of this book examines the substance of India's multilateral engagement.)¹⁹

By comparison, cooperation between the United States and its allies and partner states has advanced considerably further in terms of institutionalization. Its character, however, differs fundamentally from that of NATO, which was formed with Europe as the primary strategic theater in the early Cold War. Whereas NATO embodied a high degree of multilateralism enshrined in treaty form, with an attack on any member state treated as an attack on all, minilateralism in today's Indo-Pacific has developed into a form whereby states make, at best, a political (as opposed to legal) commitment to "consult" in emergencies. This involves multiple frameworks and three or four states coexisting alongside one another, forming a network of overlapping arrangements resembling a "patchwork."²⁰

-
- 17) "Indo daihyodan wa sanku sezu 'Nihon kizutsukeru ito nashi' Chugoku gunji pare-do" [Indian Delegation Did Not Participate: "No Intent to Harm Japan," China Military Parade], *Jiji Tsushin*, September 2, 2025, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2025090200084&g=int> (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 18) "Indo, Shanhai kyoryoku kiko no kyodo seimei ni shomei kyohi: Kiretsu rotei" [India Refuses to Sign SCO Joint Statement: Rift Exposed], *Nikkei Shimbun*, June 26, 2025., <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOGM26C800W5A620C2000000/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 19) Vrinda Malik, "BRICS Holds a Maritime Exercise at the Indo-Atlantic Crossroads—Without India," *The Diplomat*, January 27, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/01/brics-holds-a-maritime-exercise-at-the-indo-atlantic-crossroads-without-india/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 20) "Nihon, Beikoku oyobi Kankoku-kan no kyogi suru tonu komittomento" [Commitment to Consult Among Japan, the United States, and the Republic of Korea], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 18, 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100541772.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026); "Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Defence Ministers' Meeting November 2024 Joint Statement", Ministry of Defense of Japan, November 17, 2024, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2024/11/74336ab681b2d932f9ab75f4c9f2e4c4ddaf97f8.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); "Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation", Prime Minister's Office of Japan, October 22, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100410299.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026); Victor D. Cha, "Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia's Regional Architecture," *Asia Policy*, No. 11, January 2011, 27–50.

As discussed below, efforts to achieve institutional consolidation of the multilateral cooperation networks linking the United States and its allies face numerous constraints, leaving anything more ambitious than the patchwork yet to emerge in this region.

In light of the above, the international relations of the Indo-Pacific cannot be understood through the theoretical analogy of Cold War Europe's inter-bloc rivalry, in which two highly organized blocs, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, stood in confrontation.

(2) Inter-Bloc Interactions

Second, regional international relations have yet to transform in such a manner that, as the bipolar concept predicts, would lead to an outright and deep decoupling between a China-led group of states and the U.S.-led coalition. Despite the recent trend of deglobalization, the economic relationship between the United States and its allies on the one hand, and China on the other, remains incomparably thicker than that between the Eastern and Western blocs during the Cold War. Since the first Trump administration, the United States has pursued a rebalancing of its economic relationship with China, but as the phrase “small yard, high fence” suggests, the goal has been pursuing “de-risking” in critical sectors.²¹ China's rank in terms of the United States' total trade volume, having held first place through 2022, fell to third behind Mexico and Canada by 2025. Even so, the level of mutual economic interdependence remains incomparably deeper than that between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.²² Moreover, the United States remains China's largest trading partner. Economic interdependence with China is even more pronounced among the United States' allies. According to Chapter 5, even Australia, which has significantly strengthened its vigilance toward China over the past five

21) Noah Berman, “President Biden Has Banned Some U.S. Investment in China: Here's What to Know,” Council on Foreign Relations, August 29, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/president-biden-has-banned-some-us-investment-china-heres-what-know> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

22) Tanaka Mari, “Takokukan-shugi ni gakai no kizashi: Tamesareru gurobaru bijinesu no taisei: Beichu wo chushin ni furikaeru 2025-nen kamihanki no sekai boeki no henka” [Signs of Multilateralism's Collapse: Testing the Resilience of Global Business—Changes in World Trade in the First Half of 2025, Centered on U.S.-China], *Regional Analysis Report*, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), November 17, 2025, <https://www.jetro.go.jp/biz/areareports/special/2025/0901/e2ab9a41bceb747d.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

years, is cognizant of the reality that “decoupling” from China is impossible. Similar concerns are evident in Japan’s recent economic security policies and its management of economic relations with China.

Furthermore, beyond the economic sphere, security dialogue in today’s U.S.-China relationship exhibits interactions that were absent in the U.S.-Soviet relationship during the Cold War. Since President Xi Jinping assumed office in 2013, the leaders of the United States and China have communicated regularly on a variety of occasions. This stands in sharp contrast to the Cold War period from 1945 (following Japan’s surrender in August of that year) through 1984 (the year before Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party), during which U.S.-Soviet summits were held on only ten occasions (i.e., about once four years).²³

(3) The Existence of Leading States

Third, unlike the two superpowers of the early Cold War era, the United States and China today operate in a far more congested environment. As a result, the exercise of their leadership is subject to numerous constraints and compounding conditions. As noted above, India has carved out an independent position within BRICS and the SCO, frameworks that China is said to employ as instruments for countering the United States. Moreover, concerns about China’s growing influence are widespread among Southeast Asian nations, which form part of the Global South.

A 2023 Pew Research Center public opinion survey of Indians found that 67% of respondents viewed China’s international behavior as “unfavorable” (compared to 26% who viewed it favorably).²⁴ A 2025 survey by the same organization yielded the notable finding that, compared to surveys conducted in other countries, Indians were more likely to view China’s power as “weakening” (31% of respondents). Turning to Southeast Asia, opinion surveys conducted annually by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) indicate that more respondents in the region regard China as the most powerful state in economic, diplomatic, and strategic terms, surpassing the United States.²⁵ At the same time, those who “welcome” China’s

23) Compiled from various published records.

24) Christine Huang, Moira Fagan, and Sneha Gubbala, “Indians’ Views of Other Countries,” Pew Research Center, August 29, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/08/29/indians-views-of-other-countries/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

25) Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025), 2–34.

power account for only approximately 38% in the economic domain and approximately 31% in the diplomatic and strategic domains, substantially below the proportions expressing concern (approximately 61% and 68%, respectively). These quiet perceptions of China form the backdrop against which Global South nations are advancing strategies of “diversification,” “multilateral alignment,” or “hedging,” expanding their relationships not only with China but simultaneously with numerous other states. In short, these dynamics complicate China’s ability to draw countries to its side. The hedging strategies of Southeast Asian states are analyzed in depth in Chapter 6.

In comparison, one might assert that the United States appears to stand on firmer ground. In light of the perception gaps between the United States and its allies, however, some caveats are warranted. On the one hand, the United States has placed increasing emphasis on burden and responsibility sharing with its allies. In the National Security Strategy released at the end of 2025, the second Trump administration articulated a policy of strengthening a “burden sharing network” in which allies assume “responsibilities.”²⁶ The document explicitly positioned this as a necessary element of a strategy for the United States to remain “the most powerful” state. On the other hand, allies in the Indo-Pacific are not pursuing their multilateral cooperation networks solely from the perspective of burden sharing for the United States.²⁷ The thinking among Indo-Pacific allies encompasses both a search for ways to strengthen the U.S. alliance through burden sharing and, simultaneously, the expansion of multilateral cooperation as an instrument to manage the uncertainties about the United States’ regional presence and engagement.

A NIDS opinion survey conducted in 2025 solicited responses from Japanese experts on the question: “As a Japanese security strategy, have you personally thought about or engaged in discussions regarding a Plan B that envisages a situation in which Japan cannot rely on the U.S. alliance?” (Plan A, by implication, refers to the continuation of the U.S. alliance). The results indicated that many respondents conceived of Plan B in concrete terms as an expansion of cooperation with countries such as Australia and the Republic of Korea. Notably, however, many of these respondents did

26) *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, November 2025.

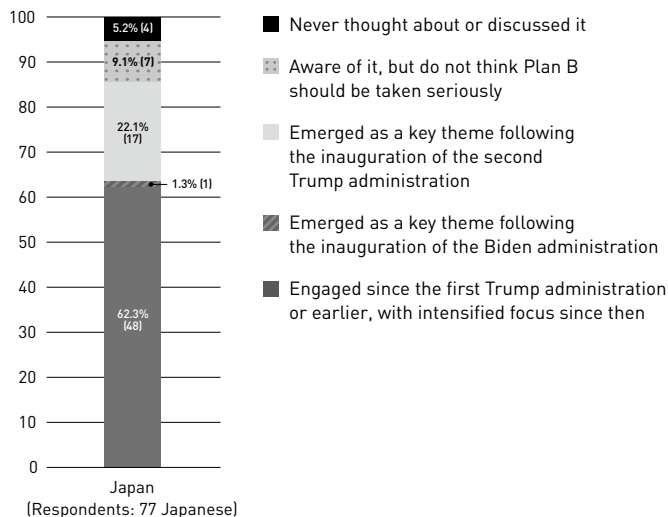
27) Ishihara Yusuke, “The Contested Concept of ‘Network’ in the National Security Strategy 2025: Beyond Burden Sharing in the Indo-Pacific,” *DCER Insight*, Dentsu Soken Center for Economic Security Research, December 19, 2025, <https://dcer.dentsusoken.com/en/reports/yi25001/>.

not frame the issue as a binary choice between “Plan A versus Plan B.” Instead, they understood cooperation networks with various countries as a means of simultaneously maintaining the U.S. alliance while also reducing dependence on the United States and pluralizing options beyond the alliance-only strategy. This perspective is consistent with what the author learned from experts and practitioners in the Republic of Korea, Australia, and Southeast Asia while conducting this research project in 2024 and 2025.²⁸ The strategic thinking of Indo-Pacific allies today, in other words, cannot be understood solely through the lens of strengthening the U.S. alliance on the premise of U.S. leadership. As analyzed in Chapter 1, the U.S. security strategy and Indo-Pacific engagement, which have undergone pronounced transformation in recent years, are significantly influenced by the “America First” approach, a more transactional, short-term, and geographically circumscribed view, coupled with a far more emphasis on relative gains than had previously been observed. The emergence of “America First” narratives and practices has further accelerated discussions among allies about a combined strategy drawing on both Plans A and B, that is, a strategy that continues to promote the alliance and simultaneously diversifies one’s security and economic network in the region and beyond. As discussed below, this trend forms the backdrop against which Indo-Pacific states, including Japan, have articulated what might be termed an “alliance plus” external strategy.²⁹

28) Based on seminars held by NIDS and exchanges with research institutions during the same period.

29) Tsuneo “Nabe” Watanabe, “Japan’s ‘Plan A+’ Strategy in the Trump Era: Toward More Cooperation with Europe,” *Ideas and Analyses*, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, August 20, 2025; Tatsumi Yuki, “Alliance vs. Alliance ‘Plus’: Japanese Foreign Policy Post-9/11,” in B.J.C. McKercher, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft* (London: Routledge, 2022), 105–115.

Figure 4. Experience in Discussing a “Plan B” Security Strategy Envisaging a Scenario Where the U.S. Alliance Is No Longer Viable



Source: Solafune, Inc., “Final Report: Commissioned Services for the Management of Surveys and Study Groups on International Relations and Security in the Indo-Pacific (Including Potentially New Domains)” (December 17, 2025).

As the foregoing makes clear, the configuration of international relations in today’s Indo-Pacific is multilayered and multidimensional in ways that the lens of bipolar bloc formation cannot capture. With these analytical considerations in mind, this book proceeds with “why has the Indo-Pacific not undergone bloc formation?” as its central research question.

2 What Is “Competitive Pluralization”?

This book departs from observers’ common preoccupation with counting the number of poles and instead focuses on the emergence of “competitive pluralization” in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁰ The concept of “pluralization” in international politics has been employed by scholars such as Nakanishi Hiroshi and Kikuchi Tsutomu in Japan, and Vu Lam and Bruce Jentleson abroad, illuminating a range of issues that pole-counting approaches tend to overlook.³¹ This book defines “competitive pluralization” in the Indo-Pacific specifically as “a condition in which many states beyond the great powers possessing enormous material capabilities are also able to exercise

30) Among analyses that point to multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific in recent domestic and international discourse, taking into account the problems of bipolarity theory, some argue that in a multipolar structure, the literal increase in the number of poles generates more options for balancing, thereby making calculations more complex and increasing uncertainty, while others contend that the availability of more options makes it easier to achieve balancing dynamically. The latter argument draws on the historical example of eighteenth-century Europe, in which Britain flexibly chose its alliance partners in the face of crises and wars to prevent the emergence of a dominant power. While it is certainly possible—and analytically fruitful—to discuss the Indo-Pacific from the perspective of multipolarity theory, this book does not place this concept at the center of its analysis for the following reasons. First, relying on a concept of multipolarity that takes account of the influence of numerous states risks obscuring the material power gap that exists between the United States and China on the one hand and all other states on the other. With this in mind, Bilahari Kausikan’s observation that an “asymmetric” multipolarization is occurring deserves attention. Furthermore, the image of multipolar balancing—in which partnership configurations are reconfigured in response to changing circumstances—does not fit the current situation in the Indo-Pacific. The phenomenon of U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific choosing to partner with China in response to changing conditions and thereby balancing against U.S. influence is, at least in the security domain, hardly observable. Bilahari Kausikan, *The Myth of the Asian Century*, (Sydney: Penguin Random House 2025).

31) Nakanishi Hiroshi, “Sogo anzen hoshoron no bunmyaku: Kenryoku seiji to sogo izon no kosaku” [The Context of Comprehensive Security Theory: The Intersection of Power Politics and Interdependence], in the Japanese Political Science Association, ed., *Kiki no Nihon gaiko: 1970-nendai (Nenpo Seijigaku)* [Japan’s Foreign Policy in Crisis: The 1970s (Annual Review of Political Science)] (1997), 97–115; Kikuchi Tsutomu, “Tagenteki chiiki chitsujo ni muketeno Indo-Taiheiyo no akitekucha: Maruchi araimento, koshigata nettowaku, dainamikuna kinko” [The Architecture of the Indo-Pacific Toward a Pluralistic Regional Order: Multi-alignment, Lattice-type Networks, and Dynamic Balance], *Aoyama Journal of International Politics, Economics and Communication*, No. 113, November 2024, 33–89; Bruce W. Jentleson, “Post-Trump World in Context: US and the Northeast Asian Strategic Order,” *Global Asia*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (December 2016); Vu Lam, “The Indo-Pacific Chooses Options, Not Sides,” *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/07/the-indo-pacific-chooses-options-not-sides/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

meaningful influence over the trajectory of interstate competition in the region.” Such “competitive pluralization” operates primarily along the following three dimensions: (1) pluralization of the *objectives* for which states compete vis-à-vis one another; (2) pluralization of the *arenas* where competition emerges; and (3) pluralization of the *means* with which states shape competition to their favor.

(1) Pluralization of the Objectives of Competition

First, the objectives of interstate competition in the Indo-Pacific have diversified, and the interconnections among them have deepened. U.S.-China rivalry is often characterized as a hegemonic struggle over whether the United States will maintain its position of superiority and even reassert its hegemony, or whether China will “undermine” that position and itself attain hegemonic status.³² Yet the objectives of interstate competition in the Indo-Pacific extend beyond this. The typical example is numerous regional countries’ explicit emphasis on securing “autonomy” as a long-standing priority for their foreign policy. In pursuit of their autonomy India and many Southeast Asian countries deliberately refrain from choosing between the United States and China for “alignment.”³³ This objective of securing “autonomy” is not something that either the United States or China can afford to ignore without consequences. As discussed in Chapter 7, from the late 1990s under the latter part of the Clinton administration onward, the United States has gradually worked to improve its relationship with India, seeking to strengthen cooperation in security and other domains

32) In this context, as Suzuki suggests, “hegemony” refers not to liberal hegemony—which entails the maintenance of institutions and the provision of public goods—but rather to hegemony in the sense of placing emphasis on coercive power to sustain a desired order. Suzuki Kazuto, “Beichu wa haken-araso wo shiteiru noka?” [Are the United States and China Engaged in a Hegemonic Struggle?], *Koken*, March 2020, <https://koken-publication.com/archives/153> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

33) Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Chapter 1: Hedging as a Policy Without Pronouncement: A Tale of Three Defense White Papers,” in *The National Institute for Defence Studies (NIDS)*, eds., *NIDS Joint Research Series: ASEAN Workshop 2025 “New Strategies in Southeast Asia.”* No. 22, https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/joint_research/series22/pdf/Cover.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026); Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Impossible Trinity Drives Southeast Asia’s Prudent Hedging,” *East Asia Forum*, June 8, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/06/08/impossible-trinity-drives-southeast-asias-prudent-hedging/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

while accommodating India's "autonomy." China, despite ongoing border disputes with India, has likewise shown consideration in managing the relationship as a partner in advancing "multipolarization," by holding a China-India summit in October 2024, for instance, for the first time in five years. Regional states pursue their own "autonomy," a pattern that both the United States and China often have to take into account. This dynamic also holds true for Southeast Asian states, over which the two great powers often compete for influence.

The pluralization of the objectives of competition applies equally to the behavior of U.S. allies such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and the Philippines. Drawing on the arguments of Phillip Lipsky and Tamaki Nobuhiko, these states are not merely "status quo powers" that have accepted and passively participated in the U.S.-led order; they have also exercised influence to actively "reform" that order's environment in ways favorable to their own interests.³⁴ In this sense, it can be observed that these states harbor "reformist status quo" objectives. Examples of allies exercising such independent influence are not in short supply. One of the most prominent is the major role played by Japan in salvaging the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) framework after the United States withdrew from it.³⁵ A similar dynamic can be seen in the manner in which Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and the Philippines have each advanced various forms of minilateralism based on their respective security strategies. All four countries organize their security strategies with a primary focus on territorial defense and advance cooperation with other states from this perspective. How to engage with the individual objectives that each of these allies considers central has remained an important question for U.S. strategy toward China. The resolve of allied states to exercise distinctive influence has come to be expressed, for example, in Japan through the concept of strategic autonomy,

34) Phillip Y. Lipsky, "Reformist Status Quo Power: Japan's Approach Toward International Organizations," in Funabashi Yoichi and G. John Ikenberry, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 107–132; Tamaki Nobuhiko, "Japan's Quest for a Rules-based International Order: The Japan-US Alliance and the Decline of US Liberal Hegemony," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (June 2020), 384–401.

35) Asia Pacific Initiative, *Kensho Abe seiken: Hoshu to reiarizumu no seiji* [Assessing the Abe Administration: Conservative and Realist Politics] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2021). See in particular Terada Takashi, "Chapter 5: TPP—Tsusho sekai demo yusu no FTA kokka ni" [TPP: Becoming One of the World's Leading FTA States in the Realm of Trade].

and in Australia through the concept of “agency” on the part of small and medium powers.³⁶

(2) Pluralization of the Arenas of Competition

Second, the arenas (issue areas) of competition among regional states in the Indo-Pacific have become multilayered, and this constitutes an important dimension of pluralization. As new technologies have emerged and advanced rapidly in recent years, the impact of advanced technologies on security has expanded, and interstate competition has extended into new arenas such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, autonomous systems, and cyberspace.³⁷ The risks associated with attempts to change the status quo in “gray zones,” neither fully peacetime nor full-scale conflict, have also long been recognized.³⁸

The pluralization of the arenas of competition is most visibly manifested in the growing importance of sub-regions within the Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asian states have been actively drawing multiple extra-regional states into the Southeast Asian region and inducing mutual check-and-balance among them, thereby pursuing the expansion of the benefits they themselves enjoy.³⁹ If this observation is correct, the strategies of Southeast Asian states themselves have, perhaps unintentionally, contributed to making Southeast Asia one of the arenas of U.S.-China competition. Moreover, while not

36) “Toranpu-shi kara no kotae wa: Nagashima Akihisa Shusho Hosakan ni kiku ‘Ishiba gaiko no shinjitsu’” [The Answer From Trump: Asking Prime Minister’s Aide Nagashima Akihisa About “The Truth of Ishiba Diplomacy”], *Seiron* (May 2025), https://www.sankei.com/article/20250406-JWA2LLUUCJA3JE5L475LYOB6UU/?outputType=theme_monthly-seiron (accessed on January 31, 2026); Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, “National Press Club Address, Australian Interests in a Regional Balance of Power,” April 17, 2023, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/national-press-club-address-australian-interests-regional-balance-power> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

37) Fuse Satoru, Sentan gijutsu to Beichu senryaku kyoso: Uchu, AI, gokucho-onsoku heiki ga kaeru tataikaikata [Advanced Technology and Strategic Competition between U.S. and China: How space, AI, and Hypersonic Weapons are Changing Warfare] (Tokyo: Shuwa System, 2020).

38) Takahashi Sugio, “Kakuheiki wo meguru shomondai to Nihon no anzen hoshō: NPR, shin START taisei, ‘Kakuheiki no nai sekai,’ kakudai yokushi” [Various Problems Regarding Nuclear Weapons and Japan’s Security: NPR, the New START Regime, a “World Without Nuclear Weapons,” and Extended Deterrence], *Kaigai Jijo*, Vol. 58, Nos. 7–8 (July–August 2010), 30–51.

39) Evelyn Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, January 2008, 113–157.

directly analyzed in this book, the expanding competition among extra-regional states over South Pacific island nations in recent years also reflects the influence exercised not only by the United States and China but also by Australia, which has traditionally wielded influence in the region, as well as by Japan and the Republic of Korea (as illustrated, for example, by Japan's expansion of capacity-building assistance and Official Security Assistance in the South Pacific).⁴⁰ Furthermore, South Pacific nations are not merely passive objects of extra-regional engagement; they are themselves active agents continuously seeking cooperation and partnerships advantageous to their own interests.

The interconnections among sub-regions within the Indo-Pacific have also taken concrete form in various ways in recent years. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, perceptions of the South China Sea's importance have changed among various states over the past several years. Japan, for example, has communicated with increasing clarity the importance of the South China Sea and the Philippines, which are geographically connected to the East China Sea. In parallel, the Philippines has deepened its engagement with developments in the East China Sea from the perspective of its own defense, strengthening cooperation through the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines framework and its understanding of the links between what are sometimes distinguished as Northeast and Southeast Asia. The Republic of Korea, which had long been cautious about involvement in security issues beyond the Korean Peninsula not least out of regard for China's reactions, has also been deepening its engagement with and statements regarding the South China Sea. The Korean scholarly community, which has developed broad research interests in Indo-Pacific issues in recent years, is leading international discussions on the potential interrelationship between maritime developments in the Indo-Pacific and developments on the Korean Peninsula.⁴¹ The growing interconnections among these sub-regions demonstrate that developments in each sub-region constitute trends that cannot be overlooked for the broader Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

40) Koga Kei, "Japan's Strategic Approach toward Island States: Case of the Pacific Islands," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 7, December 7, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3237872/japans-strategic-approach-toward-island-states-case-of-the-pacific-islands/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

41) Ito Kotaro, "Taiwan yuji ni kansuru Kankoku deno giron to kanren doko" [Discussions in the Republic of Korea Regarding a Taiwan Contingency and Related Developments], *Nakasone Peace Institute Commentary*, February 11, 2024, https://cigs.canon/uploads/2024/02/npi_commentary_korean_affairs_ito_240211.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

(3) Pluralization of the Means of Competition

Third, regional states in the Indo-Pacific have also diversified the means by which they pursue their respective objectives, what this book terms the pluralization of means of competitions. Most prominent here is the fact that regional states are advancing various cooperation frameworks in a multilayered manner. The minilateral frameworks observable in the Indo-Pacific are not driven solely by the preferences of the two great powers, the United States and China.⁴² For more detail, Chapters 3 through 6 examine the behavior of Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, the Southeast Asian states, and India, respectively, and the influence of regional states in shaping the development of these minilateral frameworks is clearly evident. These frameworks advance, for example, on the basis of each state's own geographic priorities. The trilateral cooperation among India, Indonesia, and Australia, all of which face the Indian Ocean, is one such example; another is the broadening of the Japan-U.S.-Republic of Korea framework from one focused primarily on the Korean Peninsula to one with a broader view of Indo-Pacific issues, in line with the Republic of Korea's geographically expanding foreign policy outlook. The timing of major leaps in the development of minilateral frameworks has also clearly been influenced by changes of government in the participating states: for example, the inauguration of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration in 2022 in the case of Japan-U.S.-Republic of Korea cooperation, and the inauguration of the Marcos Jr. administration in the same year in the case of Japan-U.S.-Philippines cooperation. The Japan-U.S.-Australia-India Quad has developed incrementally, with director-general-level consultations among foreign affairs authorities in 2017, a foreign ministers' meeting in 2019, a leaders' summit in 2021, and a tabletop exercise with participation of defense authorities responsible for disaster relief in 2025. India, which champions "strategic autonomy," has consistently served as the pacesetter for the framework's development.

These cooperation frameworks are not being constructed in an uncoordinated fashion. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Japan-U.S.-Australia trilateral is, for example, providing lateral support for the development of trilateral cooperation among the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia in capacity-building for maritime law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia.

42) Hanada Ryosuke, "Minilateralism: A New Page for Indo-Pacific IR Lexicon," *The Pacific Review* (September 2025), 1–26.

The Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines “Squad” and Japan-U.S.-Republic of Korea trilateral cooperation have also developed overlapping areas of cooperation as a result of the Republic of Korea’s deepening interest in the South China Sea.

This pluralization of the means of competition underscores a degree of common ground among Indo-Pacific states, which are often characterized primarily in terms of their diversity.⁴³ States in this region are frequently categorized into multi-aligned or non-aligned states: those that maintain alliances with the United States and those that eschew alliance relationships. Yet the forms of cooperation described above have emerged among these states despite their strategic differences. One driving factor of this development is the pursuit by U.S. allies, including Japan, of an “alliance plus” strategy. “Alliance plus” refers to an allied effort to diversify partnerships, driven not only by the need for cooperation in managing China’s strength but also by the need to deal with the risks of a U.S. strategic shift or a decline in U.S. presence. As this book analyzes, this widely shared imperative creates greater space and even needs for cooperation between the hedging strategies of non-aligned states and those of allied states.

Across all three dimensions of competition (objectives, arenas, and means), then, “pluralization” is progressing in the Indo-Pacific. The pluralization of competitive objectives has generated issues and complex boundaries, as well as opportunities for cooperation, that extend beyond the U.S.-China hegemonic contest. The diversification of competitive arenas, and in particular the growing importance of sub-regions, has further convoluted the dynamics of interstate competition across the Indo-Pacific. As the South Pacific and South China Sea grow in importance as competitive arenas, for example, how the two great powers manage their relationships with strategically important states in each sub-region, such as Australia in the South Pacific and Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea, will increasingly become a critical question. Moreover, the pluralization of the means of competition has expanded the opportunities for Indo-Pacific states to exercise influence over the region’s future through various forms of cooperation, despite their differing strategies. It can thus be reiterated that grasping Indo-Pacific international relations, in which

43) For concrete discussions of the common ground shared among states, see, for example, Soeya Yoshihide, *Nihon no ‘Midoru Pawa’ gaiko: Sengo Nihon no sentaku to koso* [Japan’s “Middle Power” Diplomacy: Concepts and Choices in Postwar Japan] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2005).

“competitive pluralization” is advancing across multiple dimensions, as inter-bloc rivalry under a bipolar structure dominated by the two great powers of the United States and China is inadequate to capture the realities of the region.

3 Competitive Pluralization or a Return to Inter-Bloc Rivalry?

The policies and strategies of regional states in the Indo-Pacific are shaped by each country’s distinctive individual circumstances. This does not mean, however, that their respective foreign policies are disconnected from one another. On the contrary, despite their strategic differences, states are actually coordinating with one another through various forms of partnership, including minilateralism. This suggests that “competitive pluralization,” the phenomenon in which each state seeks to exert influence from its own distinctive perspective, does not necessarily lead to regional fragmentation.

Yet this does not mean that the trend of “competitive pluralization” is destined to continue into the future. The scenario of more clearly defined blocs emerging in the Indo-Pacific cannot, of course, be excluded. Will “competitive pluralization” continue to advance in the Indo-Pacific, or will an era of inter-bloc rivalry return? The Indo-Pacific today stands at a crossroads between these two extremes.⁴⁴ In closing, this section examines three important variables for assessing how this question will unfold.

The first variable is whether the material strength of regional states beyond the United States and China will continue to be sustained and strengthened. In recent years, the era in which China boasted the highest economic growth rate in the Indo-Pacific has passed, and by some indicators countries such as India, the Philippines, and Vietnam are now expanding their economic strength at a pace exceeding China’s. Whether the trend of “the rise of the rest” will continue is a variable that directly shapes the

44) There are also approaches that attempt a conceptualization distinct from simple bipolarity while nonetheless taking account of the power of the United States and China. For example, Sahashi Ryo has conceptualized the current Asia and the world as an “ellipse” with two centers—the United States and China—that has not completely split apart, in which states are preoccupied with calibrating their distance from each of the two centers. Sahashi Ryo, “Koen: G7 to Indo-Taiheiyo no genjyo to tenbo” [Lecture: Current Situation and Prospects for the G7 and the Indo-Pacific], Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) and the 21st Century Public Policy Institute, https://www.keidanren.or.jp/pri/theme/data/pocket_230705.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

“competitive pluralization” scenario.⁴⁵ Many long-term economic forecasts published in recent years project that, by the latter half of this century, India and Indonesia will join the United States and China among the world’s top economic powerhouses, while Vietnam and the Philippines could attain economic scale on par with some advanced European countries.⁴⁶

There is no guarantee, however, that regional states will succeed in expanding their economic foundation of national power over the long term. In 2025, in addition to the Russo-Ukrainian War entering its third year, military clashes between India and Pakistan and armed confrontations over the Cambodia-Thailand border dispute underscored the persistent presence of conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, the sudden declaration of martial law in the Republic of Korea in December 2024 and the subsequent domestic political turmoil, together with the emerging confrontation between the Marcos Jr. administration and former President Duterte and his allies in the Philippines, are vivid reminders that a state’s external influence can be shaped by the course of its domestic politics. If economic growth or domestic social stability is undermined by conflict or domestic political instability, the conditions under which regional states can act as forces sustaining pluralization may no longer hold. Their capacity to withstand pressure from both the United States and China could correspondingly diminish.

The second variable is Japan’s role in shaping the trajectory of international relations in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike many regional states, Japan has not experienced sustained, long-term high economic growth in recent years and has not rapidly expanded its material national strength. Simultaneously, Japan occupies a geopolitically significant position in the context of U.S.-China rivalry and retains considerable economic strength. A broad survey of recent discourse on Japan reveals arguments that Japan is in relative decline when its economic growth rate is compared with those of other countries (for example, Japan’s relative decline is explored in Brad Glosserman’s *Peak Japan*).⁴⁷ Yet, as many of these scholars note, a state’s influence on international politics cannot be measured by economic

45) The phrase “the rise of the rest” is widely used; in the context of this book’s discussion, Fareed Zakaria is among its pioneers.

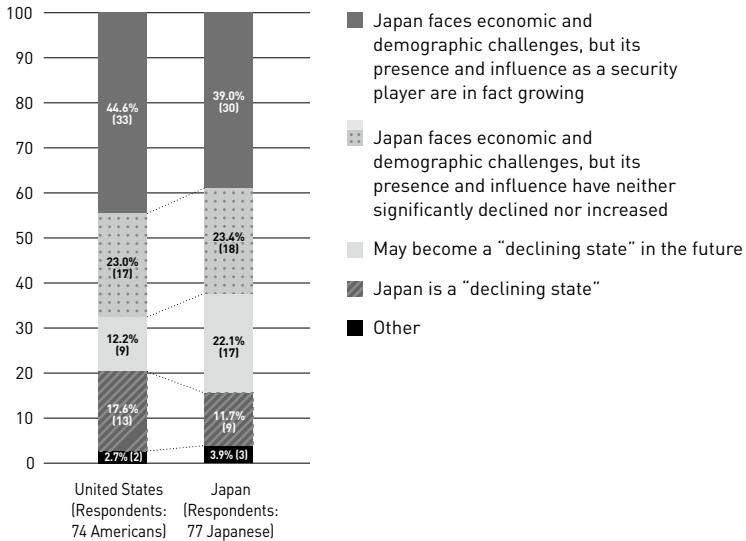
46) See, for example, The Centre for Economics and Business Research, World Economic League Table (2025), <https://cebr.com/world-economic-league-table/> (accessed on January 31, 2025).

47) Brad Glosserman, *Peak Japan: The End of Great Ambitions* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

indicators alone. Moreover, recent developments in the international situation have, if anything, raised expectations for the role Japan should play in international politics. According to an opinion survey of Japanese and U.S. experts conducted by NIDS, for example, 44.6% of U.S. respondents and 39% of Japanese respondents indicated that Japan's presence and influence are in fact growing, a sharp contrast to the proportions identifying Japan as a declining state, which stood at 17.6% among U.S. respondents and 11.7% among Japanese respondents. This tendency is consistent with the findings reported in the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index. That report distinguishes between material scale, as measured by factors such as economic strength, population, and defense spending, and actual influence exercised through the expansion of external cooperative relationships. It highlights Japan as a noteworthy example of a state that has significantly expanded its external influence in recent years despite the constraints of its material scale. Whether Japan can maintain and enhance its international influence even as its relative economic size is projected to decline, and how Japan may or may not use its influence, constitutes another variable shaping "competitive pluralization" in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁸

48) Iwata Kazumasa, ed., 2075 Jisedai AI de yomigaeru Nihon keizai [2075: Next-Generation AI will revive the Japanese Economy] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha, 2025).

Figure 5. Perceptions of Japan as a “Declining State” with Diminishing Presence and Influence as a Security Player in the Indo-Pacific



Source: Solafune, Inc., “Final Report: Commissioned Services for the Management of Surveys and Study Groups on International Relations and Security in the Indo-Pacific (Including Potentially New Domains)” (December 17, 2025).

The third variable is the trajectory of U.S.-China relations, which will be a key determinant of the character of international relations in the Indo-Pacific. For example, should U.S.-China rivalry intensify, both powers may well apply greater pressure on regional states toward bloc formation. If the United States increases pressure further in pursuit of cooperation on China strategy, its allies’ foreign policy options could narrow, potentially advancing bloc formation. At the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth (whose title was subsequently re-designated as Secretary of War) criticized as no longer sustainable the position of benefiting from economic relations with China while expecting the United States to provide security.⁴⁹ Furthermore, if the influence of

49) “Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (as delivered),” U.S. Department of War, May 31, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4202494/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-the-2025-shangri-la-dialogue-in/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

“America First,” characterized by its transactional, short-term orientation, and of “prioritizers” focused on military competition with China grows stronger, regional states may face pressure to abandon the patient cultivation of partnerships and minilateralism in favor of more rapid and direct cooperation with the United States.

Increased pressure from China could likewise drive bloc formation, and signs of this are already observable. In 2025, China applied pressure on U.S. allies on multiple fronts simultaneously: it constructed artificial structures in the Yellow Sea, deepening South Korean wariness toward China, and dispatched naval vessels to the vicinity of the Australian continent, conducting live-fire exercises in nearby waters. These Chinese activities have increased the incentives of these allied states to strengthen their cooperation with one another and their relationships with the United States. Although not directly analyzed in this book, the development of emerging China-Russia-North Korea trilateral cooperation will also be an important factor in assessing the future trajectory of pluralization or bloc formation.⁵⁰

Given all these variables, the security of the Indo-Pacific stands at a strategic crossroads. Will the forces of polarization drive the region toward a framework of inter-bloc rivalry, or will complex international relations continue to unfold under the trend of “competitive pluralization?” The analyses presented in the chapters that follow are intended to provide the basis for considering these issues.

50) Of course, the reality of the trilateral relationship at the current stage is constrained and asymmetric—far from bloc formation. For more detail, see Masuda Masayuki, ed., *Chugoku anzen hoshō repoto 2026 Fukinko na patona-shippu: Chugoku, Roshia, Kitachosen* [NIDS China Security Report 2026 Imbalanced Partnerships: China, Russia, and North Korea] (Tokyo: NIDS, 2025).

A Receding U.S.-China Rivalry as a Conceptual Game Changer

In addition to the U.S.-China scenarios examined in this chapter, it is worth considering, as a further thought experiment, a scenario in which U.S.-China rivalry subsides. One can imagine, for example (setting aside the question of probability), a scenario in which the United States significantly retreats from its engagement with the Indo-Pacific region, or in which China becomes unable to sustain its competition with the United States owing to domestic instability or economic stagnation. In such circumstances, whichever of the two great powers strengthened its position in the region through its rival's deterioration could increase its influence and, as a consequence, lose the incentive to accommodate regional states, potentially behaving more coercively. How, in such a scenario, would regional states, including Japan, exercise their own independent influence? In this sense, as a prominent Vietnamese scholar observed to the author, the continuation of peaceful rivalry between the two great powers may not necessarily be the worst scenario for regional states in the Indo-Pacific. From the perspective of regional states, some argue that U.S.-China rivalry short of armed conflict affords these states opportunities to extract benefits from both powers. The same scholar further elaborated that, were U.S.-China cooperation to advance and a paternalistic, managerial order based on great power consensus to strengthen, the scope for regional states to exercise independent influence would narrow. This concern is shared broadly among experts and practitioners across Indo-Pacific nations, including Japan, which has long been wary of the notion of a U.S.-China G2 condominium.

The various conceivable scenarios of a receding U.S.-China rivalry described above can be characterized as potential game changers that would fundamentally reshape the Indo-Pacific. Whether through a pattern in which one power becomes dominant, or one in which great power concert between the United States and China emerges, the influence of regional states as the agents sustaining pluralization would likely face significant constraints. In such scenarios, however, bipolar inter-bloc rivalry between the United States and China would no longer materialize. In this sense, it would become necessary to seek an analytical approach to Indo-Pacific international relations from a conceptual perspective entirely different from the crossroads between pluralization and bloc formation presented in this book.



The America First Conception of National Interest

U.S. Self-Perception of Power and
Foreign Policy in the Post-Unipolar World

MAEDA Yuji

Chapter

1

President Donald Trump, having reclaimed
the White House (Photo: Samuel Corum/Pool/
ABACAPRESS.COM/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

At the core of the Donald Trump administration's "America First" foreign policy lies a conception of national interest characterized by three features: (1) a narrowing of geographic scope, (2) a compression of time horizons, and (3) a pursuit of relative gains. While it is tempting to trace the origins of America First thinking in U.S. history, such as the isolationism of the interwar period, historical analogies have their limits. Trump's version of America First is best understood in its contemporary context. In particular, over the course of the 2000s and 2010s, China's rapid rise contributed to a growing perception within the United States of relative decline and to fear that the country might soon lose its status as the world's preeminent power. This loss of confidence and resentment underlie Trump's narrative to "Make America Great Again." That said, the post-pandemic economic recovery has prompted some reassessment of America's enduring strengths, and American self-perception now presents a more complex picture, no longer dominated by pessimistic forecasts of inevitable U.S. decline.

Introduction

“From this moment on, it’s going to be America First.”¹ On January 20, 2017, having won the presidential election against most expectations, Donald Trump declared in his inaugural address that the United States would put its own national interest first in every policy decision. This conviction rested on his diagnosis that “we’ve made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.” Eight years later, after four years out of office, Trump returned to the White House and reiterated the same message in his second inaugural address: “During every single day of the Trump administration, I will, very simply, put America first.”²

“America First” has taken root as one of the keywords defining the Trump administration’s foreign policy. The importance of properly understanding the meaning of America First is clear. Even as observers note the unpredictability of Trump’s words and actions, the concept offers a useful lens for identifying coherent threads running through his policy direction. The second Trump administration is said to have sharpened its America First posture still further. With conservatives now holding majorities not only in the executive branch but also in both chambers of Congress and on the Supreme Court, and with Trump’s grip on the Republican Party tightening, many of the constraints visible during his first term have fallen away. America First is thus a key concept for gauging how far the second Trump administration will go. It is also an unavoidable factor in the competitive pluralization in the Indo-Pacific, since most countries in the region are profoundly affected by the United States. In that sense, this chapter provides essential context for the discussion of other regional states’ foreign policies that follows.

What does an America First foreign policy actually mean, and why has it emerged now? Understanding this trend requires attention to the underlying shifts in American self-perception. With this question in mind, the chapter clarifies the character of the Trump administration’s America First posture and traces the shifting perceptions of and debates over U.S. power that lie behind it. Section 1 analyzes the character of Trump’s brand of America

1) Donald J. Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>.

2) Donald J. Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>.

First, arguing in particular that the conception of national interest running through it is characterized by three features: (1) a narrowing of geographic scope, (2) a compression of time horizons, and (3) a pursuit of relative gains. Section 2 then discusses where the origins of the Trump administration's America First should be located. Departing from arguments that locate its intellectual roots in earlier historical episodes such as the interwar period, when similar slogans were in vogue, this section contends that today's America First is best understood squarely within its contemporary context. Finally, Section 3 traces the shift in perceptions within the U.S. foreign policy community and among the American public since the end of the Cold War. It shows that changes in U.S. self-perception regarding national power over the 2000s and 2010s form an important backdrop to America First thinking, and that China's rise has weighed heavily on that self-perception.

As of July 2026, the second Trump administration has only completed a year and a half, and its foreign policy may yet evolve over the remainder of the term. Much depends on the coming midterm elections, too. Accordingly, this chapter does not undertake a detailed examination of specific policies. Its aim is rather to capture the character of the America First mindset that lies behind them and the context in which that mindset has come to the fore. Nor is the chapter an attempt to pin down what is genuinely novel about the Trump administration across 250 years of American history. As many of the commentators discussed in Section 2 observe, parallels with the Trump administration can be drawn from various periods in the history of U.S. foreign policy. Cataloguing the differences between every such precedent and the present administration may have its place as a historiographical exercise, but it contributes little to assessing the contemporary implications of the phenomenon. The fact that parallels can be drawn does not necessarily mean that the same forces are at work or that future trajectories will follow similar paths. Rather than relying on facile historical analogy, the Trump administration's America First should be understood within the context that connects directly to the present.

1. The America First Conception of National Interest

What does America First actually mean? Beyond the literal sense of putting the United States first, the term lacks any clear or unified definition. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), issued during the first Trump administration, characterized America First foreign policy as grounded in “American principles” and “a clear-eyed assessment of U.S. interests” in pursuit of

“prioritizing the interests of our citizens and protecting our sovereign rights as a nation.”³ Yet it does not specify what those “American principles” are. The 2025 NSS, issued under the second Trump administration, emphasizes that the administration will judge policy by “what works for America” and will act in a pragmatic manner, rather than being bound by any “traditional, political ideology.”⁴

The central issue here is how national interest is conceived. In an anarchic international system that has no central authority to enforce peace and cooperation, states are ultimately responsible for their own security and prosperity. In that sense, putting one’s own interests first is a matter of course. Why, then, does the Trump administration feel compelled to expressly insist on self-interest? The answer lies in a perception that the established course of U.S. foreign policy was sacrificing the national interest for the benefit of other countries. This view comes through clearly in Trump’s inaugural address quoted at the outset. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has likewise stated that “the United States government is not a charity,” adding that “the Chinese will do what’s in the best interests of China, the Russians will do what’s in the best interest of Russia, the Chileans are going to do what’s in the best interest of Chile and the United States needs to do what’s in the best interest of the United States.”⁵ Whether successive U.S. administrations actually failed to pursue national interests is, of course, debatable. Typically, cooperation and assistance that may appear to serve other countries reflect a strategic choice to advance U.S. interests, too. None of the U.S. policymakers in the past would admit that they did not represent U.S. interests. What distinguishes America First is the framing of national interest itself.

This chapter identifies three interrelated features of the Trump administration’s America First conception of national interest: narrowed geographic scope, compressed time horizons, and the pursuit of relative gains. This conception of national interest underlies the administration’s key

3) [U.S.] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, I and 1. Hereafter cited as 2017 NSS.

4) [U.S.] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, 8. Hereafter cited as 2025 NSS.

5) Quoted in Brantly Womack, “Rubio’s Revolutionary Downsizing of America’s Global Role,” *The Hill*, February 20, 2025, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/5153362-rubios-revolutionary-downsizing-of-americas-global-role/>. The full transcript is available at the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Germany, <https://de.usembassy.gov/secretary-rubio-on-the-megyn-kelly-show/>.

foreign policy initiatives, including tariffs and trade negotiations, pressure on allies to share burdens, and aversion to international institutions.

(1) Narrowing of Geographic Scope

The first feature is a conviction that the geographic scope within which the United States should locate its vital interests must be narrowed. Historically, the United States completed a continental geopolitical configuration of “oceans to the east and west, smaller states to the north and south,” established regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and expanded its sphere of influence by deepening its engagement in key regions of Eurasia—especially Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. World War II, in particular, marked a turning point. As Germany and Japan sought to establish regional hegemony in Europe and Asia, and after the United States itself came under armed attack at Pearl Harbor, Washington concluded that its interests could not be safeguarded without active overseas engagement in peacetime as well.⁶ Whether one calls it a liberal international order or not, the postwar United States, working in concert with allies, built a wide range of international institutions and regimes and led the construction of the international political and economic system.⁷

After the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy tended to set ambitious goals that included the spread of democracy. The Bill Clinton administration’s eastward “enlargement” of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the George W. Bush administration’s “nation building” projects in

6) Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War, and the Limits of Power* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015); Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

7) G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, new edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Carla Norrlof, *America’s Global Advantage: US Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Kyle Lascuette, *Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of Foundational Rules in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

the Middle East had strong liberal undertones.⁸ As the historian Charles Kupchan has put it,

These strategic errors were the product of ideological excess and overconfidence in the ability of American power to shape global affairs; since the 1990s, the idealist ambitions of *Pax Americana* have gone unchecked by realist constraints, producing successive bouts of strategic overreach. Americans are today reacting against this overreach. Remaking the world in America's image has proved a costly and futile proposition. As a consequence, the pendulum is swinging back from internationalism toward isolationism.⁹

At the heart of America First lies the belief that problems closer to home should be the priority. Promoting an international order on a global scale is out of the question, and the long-standing commitments to Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia also warrant reconsideration. President Trump's lament for a government "that has given unlimited funding to the defense of foreign borders but refuses to defend American borders or, more importantly, its own people" and his call to "repel the disastrous invasion of our country," referring to immigration and border control, vividly reflect this view.¹⁰ Likewise, the Department of Defense's "Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance" lists as its first concern "a vulnerable homeland arising from years of unsecured borders and increasingly capable air and missile threats."¹¹ The forthcoming National Defense Strategy (NDS), now under development on this basis, is reportedly set to operationalize America First by ranking as priorities, first, "defense of the U.S. homeland," followed by "detering China in the Indo-Pacific," and then the promotion of burden-sharing with allies and partners.¹² The "Golden Dome" air and

8) Maeda Yuji, "Daisenryaku no hyoryu: Reisengo Amerika no daisenryaku to taichu seisaku" [Drift of Grand Strategy: Post-Cold War U.S. Grand Strategy and China Policy], in *Biden no Amerika: Sono seikaikan to gaiko* [Joe Biden's Foreign Policy and His Vision], eds. Sahashi Ryo and Suzuki Kazuto (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2022), 151-164.

9) Charles A. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 23.

10) Donald J. Trump, "The Inaugural Address," January 20, 2025.

11) [U.S.] Department of Defense, *Defense Budget Overview*, June 2025 (revised July 1, 2025), https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2026/FY2026_Budget_Request.pdf.

12) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Statement on the Development of the 2025 National Defense Strategy," May 2, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/article/4172735/statement-on-the-development-of-the-2025-national-defense-strategy/>.

missile defense system covering the continental United States, whatever form it ultimately takes, is another example that reflects this homeland-first sensibility.

The 2025 NSS likewise mounts a sharp critique of globalism, declaring that the United States has no willingness to “shoulder forever global burdens to which the American people saw no connection to the national interest.”¹³ As an expression of its emphasis on the Western Hemisphere, the document proposes a “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, echoing the “Roosevelt Corollary” through which President Theodore Roosevelt once justified military intervention in Latin America.¹⁴ The aim is to take whatever action is needed to defend U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere, including blocking flows of illegal immigration and narcotics and excluding hostile influence from strategic chokepoints such as the Panama Canal.

This is not, however, an immediate abandonment of security commitments outside the Western Hemisphere or a return to the original Monroe Doctrine and isolationism of the nineteenth century. Its character is closer to cost-cutting, or, more precisely, a reconsideration of the extraordinarily far-reaching international engagement of a United States that has reigned as a unipolar hegemon since the end of the Cold War. To understand this outlook, the foreign policy factions that coexist within the Trump administration are important. For some time, observers have pointed to a contest among “primacists,” “prioritizers,” and “restrainers” within the Republican Party.¹⁵ The primacists are the traditional hawks (the neoconservatives), who emphasize global American leadership and advocate active overseas intervention. They are now in decline, however,

13) 2025 NSS, 1.

14) 2025 NSS, 5.

15) These categories are ideal types, and individuals do not necessarily fall neatly into a single category. President Trump himself, for example, is best understood not as belonging to a single faction but as combining various elements that span multiple factions. On these factions, see Mori Satoru, “Dai 2 ji Toranpu seiken no gaiko boei (1): Yokuseishugisha to yusenshugisha no anzenhoshokan to domeikoku e no inpurikeshon” [Foreign and Defense Policy of the Second Trump Administration (1): The Security Outlooks of Restrainers and Prioritizers and Their Implications for U.S. Allies], *SPF Amerika Genjo Monita* [SPF America Monitor] (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2024), https://www.spf.org/jpus-insights/spf-america-monitor/spfamerica-monitor-document-detail_173.html; Majda Ruge and Jeremy Shapiro, “Polarised Power: The Three Republican ‘Tribes’ That Could Define America’s Relationship with the World,” European Council on Foreign Relations, November 17, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/polarised-power-the-three-republican-tribes-that-could-define-americas-relationship-with-the-world/>.

and the second Trump administration is composed mainly of prioritizers and restrainers.

The prioritizers' core view is that U.S. grand strategy should rest on clear priorities across a wide range of foreign policy and security challenges. They distance themselves from the idea of maintaining or promoting a liberal international order on a global scale, and instead advocate more tailored, region-specific approaches based on the nature of each problem. By this logic, the strategic challenge that should command the highest priority is China's rise. Elbridge Colby, who serves as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, argues, for example, that the United States should pull resources back from Europe and other regions wherever possible in order to prepare for long-term competition with China and a Taiwan contingency in East Asia.¹⁶ Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's address at the IISS Asia Security Summit (the Shangri-La Dialogue), in which he insisted that "America First" does not mean "America Alone" and stressed the need to strengthen deterrence against China through cooperation with other countries, was likewise consistent with the prioritizer outlook.¹⁷

The prioritizers' approach of a focused, sharply differentiated foreign policy through selective concentration of resources draws on concepts that emerged in the post-Cold War debates over U.S. grand strategy, including selective engagement and offshore balancing, and rests on a relatively substantial intellectual foundation.¹⁸ The George W. Bush administration had already aired a view of China as a new competitor, and the Barack Obama administration proposed "rebalancing" to the Asia-Pacific, taking an increasingly tough stance on China especially in its second term.¹⁹ The Bush administration, however, shifted toward cooperation with China

16) Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

17) Koga Kei, "Shangrurira Daiarogu ni okeru Hegusesu enzetsu no yottsu no ronten" [Four Points of Debate in Hegseth's Address at the Shangri-La Dialogue], *Nichibei Domei Kenkyukai Kōmentari* [U.S.-Japan Alliance Study Group Commentary] no. 67 (Nakasone Peace Institute, 2025), 1.

18) Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 5-53; Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 86-124; Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 70-83.

19) Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 45-88.

amid the war on terror, and the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy was criticized as lacking real substance. China's role in U.S. grand strategy remained ambiguous. The first Trump administration differentiated itself from its predecessors by explicitly treating China as the principal strategic competitor.

The restrainers, by contrast, broadly oppose the global security burdens borne by the United States. At the heart of their thinking is the belief that U.S. security is not as tightly tied to events overseas as traditional internationalists insist. What restrainers despise above all is the allies "free-riding" on U.S. security commitments and neglecting to bear an appropriate share of defense burden, because the regional states directly exposed to military threats should be the ones making the greatest effort at self-defense. Vice President J. D. Vance, who at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 devoted only passing attention to the war in Ukraine before launching into a critique of European countries, is widely regarded as the leading restrainer voice within the administration.²⁰ The dissatisfaction over the Biden administration's massive aid to Ukraine made the burden-sharing issue particularly thorny in relations with European countries, but the restrainers' aversion to foreign entanglements is not inherently limited to any one region.

The prioritizers and restrainers do not necessarily clash on policy. They converge in seeking to narrow the expansive scope of U.S. overseas commitments. Reluctance to support Ukraine, for instance, is shared by prioritizers, who want to redirect resources from Europe to East Asia, and by restrainers, who simply want to reduce massive overseas assistance wherever possible. Likewise, calls for Japan and South Korea to increase their defense budgets are consistent with both prioritizer reasoning, namely that preparation against the Chinese threat is inadequate, and restrainer reasoning, namely that regional states rather than the United States should shoulder more of the burden.

(2) Compression of Time Horizons

Second, the Trump administration tends to frame U.S. national interest in short time horizons. When each party rationally seeks to maximize self-interest, the bargaining outcome depends on whether the interaction is

20) Mike Wendling, "How JD Vance Sees the World: And Why That Matters," BBC, March 12, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly82yx09zeo>.

a one-shot game or a repeated one. The classic example is the prisoner's dilemma.²¹ Even in a situation where mutual cooperation would maximize the joint payoff, in a one-shot game it is rational for each player to defect regardless of the other's choice. Cooperation thus fails to take hold, and both end up worse off. In a repeated game, however, choosing cooperation can become rational as a means of maximizing payoffs over the long run. Even when the underlying structure that rewards short-term defection remains unchanged, players can "learn" through repeated interactions—with strategies like tit-for-tat, in which one matches the other's choice in the next round—that building a long-term cooperative relationship is more advantageous on balance. This depends, of course, on the assumed payoff structure of the game and does not imply that cooperation is always rational in real-world interstate bargaining.

The short time horizon encourages policies to exploit other states' economic and military dependence to apply pressure and extract concessions for short-term gain, rather than building long-term relationships. The Trump administration's so-called transactional approach to diplomacy embodies this logic. A trade policy that has neutralized the World Trade Organization (WTO) arbitration function while wielding tariffs as a weapon to extract favorable terms in bilateral negotiations is a clear example. The America First Policy Institute (AFPI), founded in 2021 with a view to a return of the Trump administration, has set out an agenda that proposes to "tie federal funding—whether military, diplomatic, or foreign assistance—to clear objectives that *directly* benefit the American people" (emphasis added).²² In this approach, the idea of creating an international environment that benefits the United States indirectly over the long term is sidelined, and international institutions and regimes are spurned as instruments that dilute U.S. advantages in bilateral negotiations and constrain its freedom of action. This is why Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, who once advanced the concept of complex interdependence, characterize the Trump administration as "myopic."²³

21) Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214; Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985): 226-254; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

22) Scott Toland, Aaron Hedlund, and Steve Smith, eds., "America First Agenda: Guide to the Issues," America First Policy Institute, esp. chap. 28, <https://agenda.americafirstpolicy.com/strengthen-leadership/establish-an-america-first-foreign-policy>.

23) Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The End of the Long American Century," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 4 (July/August 2025): 68-79, 70.

The issue of time horizons also has profound implications for alliance politics. Some alliances are short-lived and reshuffled on an ad hoc basis to meet a specific and immediate threat. In that case, states simply want to maximize the ally's contribution. Other alliances are geared toward sustaining a long-term relationship, which sometimes warrants granting concessions that favor the partner. According to Tamaki Nobuhiko's study of the dynamics of asymmetric alliances, the United States built its alliance network in Asia during the Cold War not by making unilateral demands and strong-arming the allies but by making considerable concessions to them.²⁴ Concessions tended to be chosen as a preferred policy when Washington took into account the domestic political circumstances of the partner state and judged that there was an advantage to sustaining a cooperative, pro-American government and forging a long-term relationship. On the other hand, where maintaining and strengthening a long-term relationship is not a priority, the calculus shifts toward pressuring the partner for concessions and extracting more favorable terms in the short term.

To be sure, the America First logic has its own medium-to-long-term outlook in terms of preserving and bolstering U.S. power as much as possible when its preeminence is increasingly challenged by rising powers. The interest in acquiring Greenland, for example, presumably reflects considerations of the Arctic Ocean's growing strategic importance in the future. In defending the legitimacy of America First policies, the Trump administration argues that a wealthy and strong United States benefits its allies as well.²⁵ However, the core of the time-horizon issue discussed here concerns the *interactive* dynamics in interstate bargaining. The question is how far the Trump administration anticipates the reactions of other states to its own actions. International politics is marked by various dilemmas and trade-offs, and blunt power-maximizing behavior invites pushbacks from both friends and adversaries. All states put their own interests first, but the pursuit of national interest requires careful calibration that anticipates foreign pushback in order to avoid mutually undesirable outcomes.

24) Tamaki Nobuhiko, *Teikoku Amerika ga yuzuru toki: Joho to atsuryoku no hitaisho domei* [When Imperial America Yields: Concession and Pressure in Asymmetric Alliances] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2024).

25) 2025 NSS, 10.

(3) Pursuit of Relative Gains

The third feature of the America First conception of national interest is an explicit tendency to prioritize relative gains over absolute gains. It is a long-standing question in international relations whether states want to maximize their gains in absolute terms, or in relative terms.²⁶ In economics, rationality refers to maximizing one's gains regardless of how much others gain. The fact that states actually engage in trade, even though no bilateral economic relationship has a perfectly equal balance sheet, cannot be explained without reference to absolute gains. Many countries take it as a win when their citizens enjoy rising living standards. In security affairs, however, relative gains often take on greater importance. In a world where national fortunes are ultimately decided by competition and war with others, power is fundamentally relative.

The Trump administration's foreign policy reflects a stark, zero-sum calculus of gains and losses. President Trump has consistently advanced a neo-mercantilist view that frames international economic relationships in zero-sum terms, asserting that "we are losing our jobs, we're losing our base, [and] we're losing our money."²⁷ This message has won broad support among American voters. Trade policy that wields tariffs as a negotiating weapon to extract concessions has grown still more aggressive in the second administration. Tariffs raise the prices of goods and can fuel inflation, with attendant downsides for the U.S. economy, too. But they can be a powerful negotiating tool as long as the other country suffers more from stagnating trade. As Sahashi Ryo observes, the underlying rationale is that "no other

26) Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 485-507; Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (1991): 1303-1320; John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5-49; Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, "The Promise of Institutional Theory," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 39-51.

27) "Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Interview with Maria Bartiromo and Charlie Gasparino," Fox Business News, August 20, 2015, retrieved from the American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-maria-bartiromo-and-charlie-gasparino-fox-business-news>.

country should be allowed to gain more than America does.”²⁸

A similar logic applies to alliance management, where the Trump administration emphasizes the importance of reducing the U.S. burden as much as, if not more than, working together for shared goals. The 2025 NSS sets out not only “burden-sharing” but also “burden-shifting,” reinforcing the message that allies in each region should bear primary responsibility for the security of their own region.²⁹ The burden-sharing agenda has already led to some new agreements, such as when NATO countries set a new defense spending target of 5% of GDP by 2035 (3.5% as core defense expenditure and 1.5% for related infrastructure and other investments) in June 2025.³⁰ Likewise, in November, South Korea announced that it would raise defense spending to 3.5% of GDP.³¹

If allies acquire independent capabilities and reduce their dependence on the United States, U.S. influence in alliance politics could gradually decline over the long run.³² These dilemmas of alliance management, however, are either not taken seriously or are subordinated to the priority of reducing U.S. burdens. There is also likely a calculation at work that the European and Asian allies would be inclined to accept burden-shifting without causing a serious rupture with the United States, because the growing military threats of Russia and China incentivize them to expand their own capabilities and to retain the U.S. alliance in any case.

In sum, the Trump administration’s America First foreign policy rests on a distinctive conception of national interest. Perceiving that the traditional foreign policy establishment has failed to serve U.S. interests, Trump’s America First narrows the geographic scope, operates on shorter time horizons, and emphasizes relative gains.

28) Sahashi Ryo, “Toranpu gaiko towa nanika: Beichu tairitsu to kokusai chitsujo no shorai” [What Is Trump’s Foreign Policy? U.S.–China Rivalry and the Future of International Order], in *Toranpu no Amerika: Naisei to gaiko, soshite sekai* [America Under Trump: Divided at Home, Watched by the World], eds. Sahashi Ryo and Umekawa Takeshi (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2025), 123-140, 127.

29) 2025 NSS, 12.

30) “Trump Says Nato’s New 5% Defence Spending Pledge a ‘Big Win’,” *BBC News*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/japanese/articles/cj3rnv212p0o>.

31) Jesse Johnson, “Pentagon No. 3 Praises Seoul’s Defense Budget Hike as Eyes Turn to Tokyo,” *Japan Times*, November 16, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/11/16/japan/politics/south-korea-defense-spending-us-japan/>.

32) Brian Blankenship, “Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance Burden Sharing,” *Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024): 41-61.

2. The Origins of America First

Given that the Trump administration's brand of America First, with its distinctive features, directly challenges the internationalism that has long enjoyed a bipartisan consensus within the United States, it is natural that questions arise about why and from where it has emerged.

Many analyses look to history for the answer. Walter Russell Mead of the Hudson Institute, for instance, marked the launch of the first Trump administration by pointing to a revival of early-nineteenth-century Jacksonian populism.³³ Combined with nationalism, that populism produces an orientation toward the home front rather than abroad, prioritizing domestic problems and rejecting the wasteful expenditure of resources on ambitious foreign policies aimed at maintaining and promoting a liberal international order. Michael Kimmage of the Wilson Center, writing on the launch of the second Trump administration, has argued that Trump's "populist, nationalist, antiglobalist spirit" can be traced back to the anti-communist right-wing movement of the 1950s, positioning it as a strain of nativism set against an internationalism that emphasizes universal values.³⁴ Others have focused on the unpredictable, risk-taking "madman" approach to foreign policy and drawn comparisons between the Trump administration and the Richard Nixon administration.³⁵

The most prominent historical comparison, however, is with the United States' tradition of isolationism dating from the nation's founding, and especially with the interwar period in which the "America First" slogan first came into vogue. According to this view, isolationism, rather than the internationalism that took root after World War II, has actually exerted the longer and more deeply rooted influence on U.S. foreign policy. Trump's America First is simply a return to the past.

In the interwar United States, resistance to active engagement in Europe and other regions remained strong. Even President Woodrow Wilson,

33) Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017): 2-7. See also Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Hamiltonian Statecraft: A Grand Strategy for a Turbulent World," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 5 (September/October 2024): 52-66.

34) Michael Kimmage, "The World Trump Wants: American Power in the New Age of Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (March/April 2025): 8-21, 10.

35) James D. Boys, "The Unpredictability Factor: Nixon, Trump and the Application of the Madman Theory in US Grand Strategy," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 3 (2021): 430-451; Daniel W. Drezner, "It's a Madman's World," *Foreign Policy* 255 (January 2025): 52-55.

commonly remembered for his liberal internationalist ideas (Wilsonianism) including the League of Nations, only shifted his position reluctantly. At the outbreak of World War I, Wilson stated that as a basic American posture, the country should think of “America first” and maintain neutrality. Walter Page, the U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom, wrote to Wilson that as the European powers wore one another down through war, “we shall be immensely stronger financially and politically.” American leaders initially saw themselves as a bystander gathering the spoils of others’ conflict.³⁶ Wilson decided to intervene only after American lives and interests were directly threatened by German submarine attacks. Even after the war, Senate ratification of membership in the League of Nations was rejected over concerns that it would constrain U.S. sovereignty and freedom of action, and a common narrative took hold that Americans had needlessly shed blood for European problems. The 1920s saw the Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge administrations pursue a small government by downsizing the federal government, cutting taxes, easing regulation, and reducing military spending.

The United States subsequently rejected international cooperation in responding to the Great Depression as well. The Smoot-Hawley Act, enacted in 1930 under the Herbert Hoover administration, became an infamous symbol of protectionism for the way it chilled international trade through sweeping tariffs. President Franklin Roosevelt, who succeeded Hoover, set out the following stance in his first inaugural address: “Our international trade relations, though vastly important, are in point of time and necessity secondary to the establishment of a sound national economy. I favor as a practical policy the putting of first things first.”³⁷ In the summer of 1933, when an international conference convened in London to stabilize exchange rates, Roosevelt sent a message declaring that each country should focus on its own domestic economic recovery rather than on international exchange rates, effectively gutting the conference. Even into the late 1930s, Roosevelt maintained a posture of supporting countries under attack by the Axis powers while avoiding being drawn into the war. According to the historian Warren Kimball, Roosevelt “wanted... victory and global political influence without paying the price.”³⁸ From the private

36) Quoted in Dale C. Copeland, *A World Safe for Commerce: American Foreign Policy from the Revolution to the Rise of China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 200.

37) Quoted in Kupchan, *Isolationism*, 271.

38) Quoted in Kupchan, *Isolationism*, 286.

sector, the America First Committee, formed in September 1940, mounted vigorous lobbying against U.S. entry into the war. Drawing on the lesson that attacks on American shipping had pulled the country into World War I, the committee campaigned to keep U.S. ships out of European waters and to oppose material assistance through the Lend-Lease Act.³⁹ In the end, this stance only gave way once the United States itself came under direct attack at Pearl Harbor.

It is possible to discern important parallels between this history of the interwar period and the Trump administration's policies. The prioritization of domestic over foreign concerns and the underlying skepticism over why Americans should shed blood and sweat overseas underlie the "America First" slogan then as now. One might also add that the geographic conditions that insulate the United States from other great powers and provide better security than most tend to encourage isolationist thinking across eras.

Although lessons from history are valuable, we should be cautious about suggesting a direct lineage between today's America First and the history of the interwar period. Suppose, hypothetically, that contemporary Japan were to undertake a major shift toward fully autonomous defense and protectionist economic policies. Would it be persuasive to characterize that as a return to the Edo-period *sakoku* policy of seclusion? There may be social value in sounding the alarm about such historical regressions, but the factors actually driving a strategic shift should be sought in a more proximate context.

Differences from the interwar period can also be identified. Harding and Coolidge, for example, sharply cut military budgets, and even Roosevelt was reluctant to expand armaments until war in Europe loomed in the late 1930s. The America First Committee called not only for non-intervention but also for stronger armaments. By then, however, it was 1941 and the world was already at war, so the committee can hardly be said to have placed particular weight on military power given the circumstances. The Trump administration, by contrast, is keen to maintain the edge of American military power. Robert O'Brien, who served as National Security Advisor in the first Trump administration, advocates the Trump administration's "peace through strength" approach and advances a narrative of rebuilding a U.S. military weakened by previous administrations.⁴⁰ In July 2025, the

39) Wayne S. Cole, "The America First Committee," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 44, no. 4 (1951): 305-322.

40) Robert C. O'Brien, "The Return of Peace Through Strength: Making the Case for Trump's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 4 (July/August 2024): 24-38.

administration's flagship "One Big, Beautiful Bill" passed with sweeping tax cuts and reductions in social welfare spending, alongside a substantial increase in military spending. Total defense-related expenditure for fiscal year 2026 is projected to exceed one trillion dollars.⁴¹

U.S. public opinion likewise reflects a deep-seated attachment to American military power. Opinion polls show that, whereas Americans are split roughly evenly on whether being the world's leading economy matters, those who consider being the world's leading military power important outnumber those who do not by nearly two to one. This ratio has stayed more or less constant over the thirty years from 1993 to 2025.⁴² Interestingly, this emphasis on military power is still stronger among Republicans than among Democrats. According to a separate survey conducted in April 2024, around 41% of Democrats list "maintaining U.S. military superiority" as a foreign policy priority, compared with 68% of Republicans.⁴³ Despite the enormous costs, support remains strong for sustaining the military power that is the wellspring of U.S. global influence.

3. U.S. Self-Perception of National Power and America First

(1) Perceptions of National Power

To understand the background against which America First thinking has gained traction, U.S. self-perception of national power offers a key. A widely held view is that a loss of self-confidence has produced the inward-looking America First tendency. President Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) rhetoric itself rests on the perception that the United States has been exploited by other countries and weakened relative to them. Some attribute the growth of the MAGA movement to a growing perception of

41) Erin D. Dumbacher, Michael C. Horowitz, and Lauren Kahn, "Will Trump's 'Big Beautiful' Defense Spending Last?" Council on Foreign Relations, July 9, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/will-trumps-big-beautiful-defense-spending-last>.

42) Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>.

43) Jim Lobe, "What Are Americans' Biggest Foreign Policy Priorities?" *Responsible Statecraft*, April 24, 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/us-foreign-policy-poll/>.

U.S. economic downturns and income inequalities at home.⁴⁴ Research has also shown that perceptions of one's own country's preeminent power are associated with public support for more militarist and hardline foreign policies.⁴⁵ If the converse also holds, the perception of relative decline should lead to public attitudes leaning toward more passive and inward-looking foreign policies.

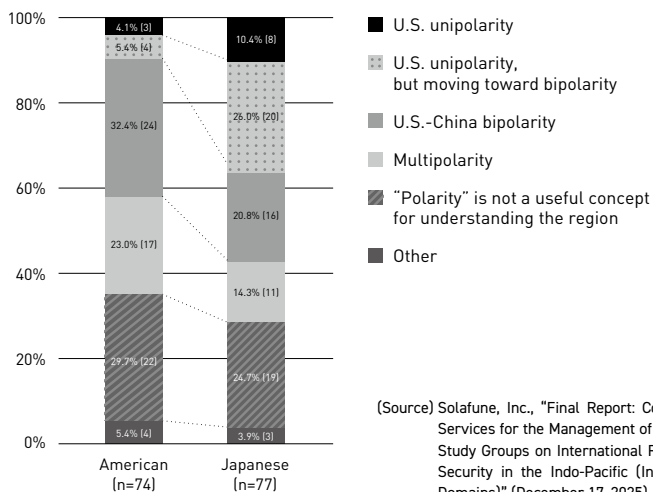
One important concept for analyzing the U.S. position in the international political system is polarity. Power in international politics is notoriously difficult to define and measure, and American researchers do not strictly agree on the polarity of today's world. However, it is increasingly common to question U.S. unipolarity. John Mearsheimer, well known for his offensive realism, identifies the United States, China, and Russia as poles primarily on the basis of military power.⁴⁶ The East Asia specialist Jennifer Lind, in her recent work, presents an analysis of U.S.-China bipolarity.⁴⁷ Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth argue for a "1+1+X" configuration in which the United States remains the world's preeminent state while China stands well above the others.⁴⁸ Some hold that unipolarity is unlikely to give way easily, given the many unique strengths the United States possesses, but this view is in the minority.⁴⁹ When Charles Krauthammer suggested the end of the Cold War would usher in a "unipolar moment," he predicted that it would persist for 30 to 40 years.⁵⁰ Thirty-five years on, that period may now have

-
- 44) Mariana Mazzucato, "The Broken Economic Order: How to Rewire the International System in the Age of Trump," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (March/April 2025): 121-132; Jason Furman, "The Post-Neoliberal Delusion: And the Tragedy of Bidenomics," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (March/April 2025): 133-147.
 - 45) Caleb Pomeroy, "Hawks Become Us: The Sense of Power and Militant Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Security Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 1, 2024): 88-114; Charles A. Kupchan, "Elite Persuasion, Threat Perception, and Ideological Mobilization: The Real Drivers of Hawkish Public Attitudes," *Security Studies* 33, no. 3 (May 26, 2024): 485-494.
 - 46) John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); John J. Mearsheimer, "War and International Politics," *International Security* 49, no. 4 (2025): 7-36.
 - 47) Jennifer Lind, "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power," *International Security* 49, no. 2 (2024): 7-55.
 - 48) Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2015): 7-53; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power's Staying Power," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023): 76-91.
 - 49) Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
 - 50) Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 23-33.

run its course.

An opinion survey of Japanese and U.S. experts commissioned by NIDS (Figure 1) brings out the divergence in perceptions between the two countries.⁵¹ Among Japanese experts, the view that the Indo-Pacific region remains under U.S. unipolarity persists strongly (a combined 36.4%), exceeding the share that sees the region as having U.S.-China bipolarity or multipolarity (a combined 35.1%). Among American experts, by contrast, only a small share believes the region is characterized by U.S. unipolarity (a combined 9.5%), while a majority hold a view of bipolarity or multipolarity (a combined 55.4%). These data suggest that Americans themselves perceive U.S. relative decline more sharply than the Japanese do.

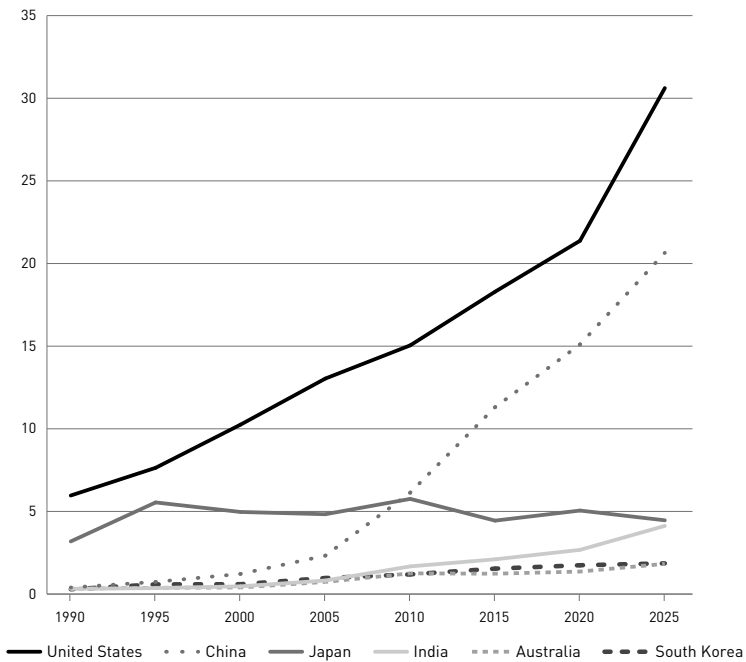
Figure 1. American and Japanese Expert Opinions on U.S. Power in the Indo-Pacific



51) National Institute for Defense Studies, *Indo Taiheiyō no kokusai kankei anzenhoshō (shinryōiki o fukumi-uru) ni kakaru chosa oyobi kenkyūkai no jissai ni kakaru kaigi uneī gyomū itaku saishu hokokusho* [Final Report: Commissioned Services for the Management of Surveys and Study Groups on International Relations and Security in the Indo-Pacific (Including Potentially New Domains)] (December 17, 2025, commissioned to Solafune, Inc., unpublished). The survey targeted private-sector researchers, primarily affiliated with universities and think tanks; the number of valid responses was 77 Japanese and 74 American. Note that the report does not include a statistical significance analysis.

Figure 2, though a simple comparison of economic size, makes clear that China's national power has reached a scale that stands well above that of Japan or India. Even during the Cold War, often described as a U.S.-Soviet bipolar structure, the Soviet economy at its peak amounted to only about half the size of the U.S. economy. The United States during the Cold War acknowledged the Soviet Union as a military equal but never treated it as an equal in the economic and other domains.⁵² A full parity with the United States across all dimensions of power should not be a strict requirement for a rival state to be counted as America's peer competitor and a pole.

Figure 2. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Indo-Pacific Countries, 1990-2025
(Trillions of U.S. dollars)



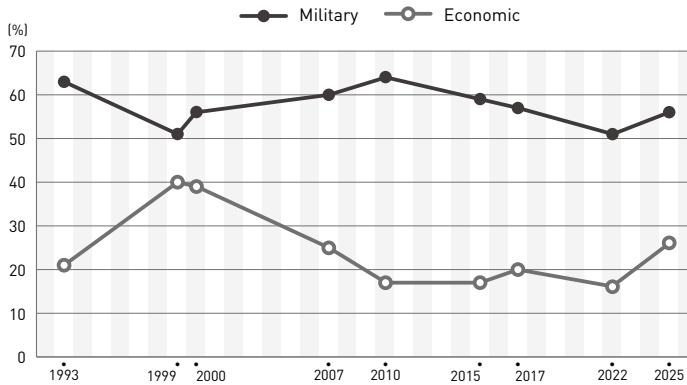
(Source) Author's illustration based on data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). International Monetary Fund, "World Economic Outlook," [https://data.imf.org/en/Data-Explorer?datasetUrn=IMF.RES:WEO\(9.0.0\)](https://data.imf.org/en/Data-Explorer?datasetUrn=IMF.RES:WEO(9.0.0)).

52) William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

On the other hand, the continued growth of the U.S. economy has spurred a more optimistic view, too. Many Americans today believe that the gap between the United States and China is unlikely to close as easily as it was assumed ten years ago. Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi, who handled China policy in the Joseph Biden administration, observe that “a new consensus took hold” in U.S. perceptions of China.⁵³ As they put it, “an aging, slowing, and increasingly less nimble China would not overtake an ascendant United States. Washington shifted from pessimism to overconfidence.” China’s post-pandemic economic recovery has lagged, while the U.S. economy has shown robust growth. This has overturned the view that China would inevitably overtake the United States in economic size. Americans, on this account, are once again deepening their confidence in U.S. staying power. Whether this shift of opinions amounts to “a new consensus” is another matter, but it is an important point that American perceptions of the U.S.-China balance of power are not uniformly pessimistic.

Figure 3 shows changes in the share of U.S. public opinion that perceives the United States as the world’s leading military and economic power. Over the past thirty years, a majority of Americans have consistently believed that the United States is the world’s strongest military power. Comparatively, Americans are less sure of U.S. economic preeminence, which shows more substantial fluctuations over time. In particular, since the global financial crisis of 2008, the share of Americans who view the U.S. economy as the world’s number one has remained below 20% for extended periods, reaching its lowest point (16%) in 2022 amid the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump’s rise to power coincided with this American loss of confidence especially through the 2010s.

53) Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, “Underestimating China: Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing’s Enduring Advantages,” *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025): 66-81, 68.

Figure 3. Share of Americans Who View the United States as the World's Leading Power (Military and Economic)

(Source) Author's illustration based on data from Gallup. Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>.

Yet here too, the most recent data carry an important qualification. The share of Americans who rate the U.S. economy as the world's number one recovered to 26% in 2025, marking the largest upward shift since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Americans have consistently identified either the United States or China as the leading economy since the 2010s. In 2012, more Americans (53%) named China as the world's economic leader, compared to 33% naming the United States. This ratio changed dramatically by 2023, when 44% of the respondents said the United States was the world's greatest economy, against 42% for China.⁵⁴ Again, this shows that U.S. self-perception of national power is not on a simple downward trajectory. Rather, it presents a more complex picture where pessimistic forecasts of relative decline coexist with an optimism that rediscovers America's enduring strength.

To some extent, this converges with a dual character of the Trump administration's political rhetoric. Trump has stoked a sense of crisis over American decline, yet at the same time argues that it is still possible to preserve and bolster U.S. power by shifting to America First policies. According to his narrative, the United States fell into crisis because of the misguided direction of the foreign policy establishment, but he could "Make

54) Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World."

America Great Again” under his leadership. The 2025 NSS, issued under the second Trump administration, calls for a strategic shift “to ensure that America remains the world’s strongest, richest, most powerful, and most successful country.”⁵⁵ It conveys a sense of crisis over U.S. power, yet builds its argument around the logic that a strategic reorientation can turn things around. Notably, the perception of U.S. economic power shown in Figure 3 trends upward in tandem with Trump’s two presidential inaugurations, in 2017 and 2025. While one cannot generalize too much from these data, we cannot wholly dismiss the possibility that Trump’s projected image of a strong America has influenced public opinion.

This raises a chicken-and-egg question: Did public opinion give rise to Trump’s America First, or did Trump produce that public opinion? In reality, both are likely at work. Public discontent over relative decline and economic problems at home supplied the soil that Trump exploited and amplified for political gain. At the same time, the substantial upward shift in 2025 coincides not only with Trump’s return but also with the moment at which a rapid post-pandemic economic recovery came to be widely recognized. Americans’ perceptions of their country’s power do not simply follow pronouncements by political leaders but also reflect macroeconomic realities on the ground.

(2) The Spread of Inward-Looking Attitudes

Mirroring this shift in U.S. perceptions of national power, the growing inward-looking tendency to favor the home front over foreign affairs shows clearly in opinion polls. According to a Gallup compilation of survey data since the turn of the century, the share of Americans who believe the United States should play a leading or major role in the world fell to a record low of 65% in 2023.⁵⁶ The “leading role” share had fallen sharply on previous occasions as well, but the decline had been absorbed into responses for a “major role,” leaving the combined share largely unchanged. Since the 2010s, however, support for the United States playing only a “minor role” has grown, reaching a record high of 28% in the most recent 2025 data.⁵⁷

55) 2025 NSS, 1.

56) Jeffrey M. Jones, “Fewer Americans Want U.S. Taking Major Role in World Affairs,” *Gallup*, March 3, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/471350/fewer-americans-taking-major-role-world-affairs.aspx>.

57) Gallup, “U.S. Position in the World.”

This trend is corroborated by the June 2024 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey, which found that 56% of Americans believe the United States should play an active role in the world, close to the lowest level since the survey began in 1974.⁵⁸

Notably, whereas Republicans traditionally tended to advocate more proactive and interventionist foreign policies than Democrats, the two parties' preferences reversed around 2015. Republican supporters have since become far more reluctant to support international commitments. The same survey reveals growing isolationist sentiments among independents as well, with a majority responding that the United States should "reduce its involvement in world affairs." On the partisan divide, a Pew Research Center survey asked respondents to choose between the views: that "It's best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs," and that the United States "should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home." Among Republicans, 67% chose the latter.⁵⁹ Since Trump became the center of gravity of the Republican Party, the GOP base has displayed an unmistakable inward turn.

To be sure, the view that traditional alliance relationships are valuable for U.S. security continues to be shared by a majority of Americans,⁶⁰ and is held especially firmly among foreign policy experts.⁶¹ When it comes to the use of military force, however, caution has grown stronger. A June 2025 survey conducted shortly after the launch of the second Trump administration drew a distinction between optimists and pessimists about U.S. overseas military intervention. Pessimists, who believe such intervention worsens rather than improves the situation both in the country of intervention and in the United

58) Dina Smeltz, "American Support for Active US Global Role Not What It Used to Be," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 22, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/american-support-active-us-global-role-not-what-it-used-to-be>.

59) Richard Wike et al., "Majorities of Americans Support Several – But Not All – Types of Foreign Aid," Pew Research Center, May 1, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/05/01/majorities-of-americans-support-several-but-not-all-types-of-foreign-aid/>.

60) Dina Smeltz and Karl Friedhoff, "Republicans and Democrats Support US Alliances, but for Different Reasons," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 22, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/republicans-and-democrats-support-us-alliances-different-reasons>.

61) Dina Smeltz et al., "US Opinion Leaders Endorse Alliances and Security Guarantees," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, December 18, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/us-opinion-leaders-endorse-alliances-and-security-guarantees>.

States itself, outnumber optimists by nearly two to one.⁶² Support for the use of military force also varies substantially by scenario.⁶³ If Germany were attacked by Russia, for example, support for U.S. intervention is strong across party lines, but if China were to use force over Japan's Senkaku Islands, support for U.S. military intervention falls below half. In the case of a Taiwan contingency, there is broad support for providing supplies, but public and expert opinion diverge with regard to military intervention.⁶⁴ When asked whether the U.S. Navy should be sent to break a blockade around Taiwan, taking into account the risk of direct conflict with PLA forces, a majority of experts across party lines respond affirmatively. By contrast, the general public is far more reluctant to take the risk. In short, even as maintaining U.S. military superiority and alliance relationships continues to be regarded as important, the use of military force is approached with a strong sense of caution.

Trade is looked at generally favorably in U.S. public opinion, but skepticism is growing among Republican supporters. According to a February 2025 survey, 81% of respondents believe that trade offers the United States opportunities for economic growth, compared to just 14% stressing that imports from other countries threaten U.S. industries.⁶⁵ Another survey similarly found that a large majority (75%) take the overall view that trade is good for the U.S. economy, and majorities across all party affiliations hold the view that "trade between the United States and other countries benefit

62) Support for overseas military intervention shows a strong partisan pattern. Approval of the use of military force runs higher when the respondent's preferred party is in office, and lower when the opposing party is in office. That said, the shifts that accompany changes of administration occur in both Republican and Democratic ranks and partly cancel out, so changes in overall voter sentiment also carry meaning. Jamie Ballard, "Do Americans Think the Bombing of Iran and Other U.S. Foreign Military Interventions Were the Right Decisions?" *YouGov*, July 7, 2025, <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/52495-do-americans-think-the-bombing-of-iran-was-the-right-decision>.

63) Karl Friedhoff, "Americans Largely Support Using US Troops to Defend Allies," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, September 23, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-largely-support-using-us-troops-defend-allies>.

64) Craig Kafura et al., "Republican Foreign Policy Experts Signal Strong Support for Taiwan," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, February 6, 2025, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/republican-foreign-policy-experts-signal-strong-support-taiwan>.

65) Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World."

both the United States and other countries.”⁶⁶ One step deeper, however, an interesting nuance emerges. When asked to choose among (1) reducing trade and improving self-sufficiency, (2) forming trade blocs with friendly states, and (3) advancing global free trade, a majority of Republican supporters choose the first option. By contrast, Democratic supporters and independents lean strongly toward the third. The second option is by far the least popular, suggesting that trade blocs of the kind seen during the Cold War are viewed unfavorably. The outlook on trade among Republican voters seems to coalesce around putting a pause on ever-expanding free trade and avoiding giving special treatment to allies and friends. This outlook aligns with the Trump administration’s trade policy.

(3) The Growing Presence of a Rising China

Finally, the China factor in this transformation of American perceptions of national power and foreign policy preferences warrants attention, since the rise of America First has coincided with the recognition of China’s rise. For decades beginning in the 1970s, America’s engagement policy toward China operated on the basis of a lopsided power balance between the two countries. When China set out on the path of reform and opening up under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, its national power base was minuscule relative to that of the United States. China’s disproportionate gains from participating in the global market were therefore not seen as a major problem. U.S. capital flowed into China as an attractive investment destination offering cheap labor, and U.S.-China trade expanded dramatically. During this period, many experts argued that there was no need to be alarmed by China’s growth.⁶⁷ However, all of that changed with China’s rapid economic growth and military modernization, its assertive actions in the East and South China Seas, and the centralization of power under Xi Jinping. Expectations that

66) Karl Friedhoff, “Americans See Benefits of Trade, yet Support Restrictions to Protect US Jobs,” *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 22, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-see-benefits-trade-yet-support-restrictions-protect-us>. See also Craig Kafura and Sam Dong, “Most Americans Think the United States Should Pursue Global Free Trade,” *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, May 5, 2025, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/most-americans-think-united-states-should-pursue-global-free-trade>.

67) Robert S. Ross, “Beijing as a Conservative Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 2 (March/April 1997): 33-44; Thomas J. Christensen, “Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China’s Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 5-40.

economic engagement would lead to political liberalization in China and to stable, friendly U.S.-China relations collapsed. Around the mid-2010s, during Obama's second term, the U.S. foreign policy community came to perceive China as a strategic competitor.⁶⁸ The Trump administration takes credit for reversing a long-standing U.S. engagement policy with China.⁶⁹

A Chicago Council on Global Affairs analysis compiling data from 1978 onward finds that U.S. public sentiment toward China has reached a historic low across party lines, with the deterioration since 2020 especially pronounced.⁷⁰ Respondents were asked, for example, to choose between “undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China” and “actively work to limit the growth of China’s power.” They had previously favored the former by roughly 70 to 30. That ratio reversed around 2020, and as of 2024 the latter is the majority view by 55 to 40. In another survey, only 25% of respondents view U.S.-China trade as benefiting both sides equally, while 46% believe China gains more.⁷¹ Among Republicans alone, the share that views the relationship as overly favorable to China reaches 60%. The perception that trade favors foreign countries over the United States, and the resulting shift toward a relative-gains outlook, developed in tandem with the trajectory of U.S.-China relations over the past several decades.

Figure 4 shows which country Americans have identified as the greatest enemy of the United States since 2016. The data reveal that U.S. public hostility toward China surged at two points. The first came when the first Trump administration announced strategic competition with China (2018 to 2019). The second, even more dramatic, shift came when Americans suffered tangible harm from the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2021). Broken down by party, Democrats tend to see Russia as the greatest threat rather than China, while a majority of Republicans (58%) point to China rather than Russia.⁷² In every domain, Republicans display a roughly fifteen- to twenty-point higher share than Democrats in expressing skepticism about

68) Maeda, “Daisenryaku no hyoryu.”

69) 2025 NSS, 19-20.

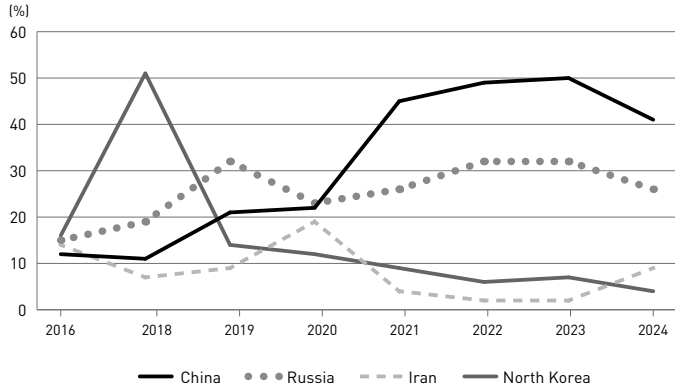
70) Craig Kafura, “American Views of China Hit All-Time Low,” *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October 24, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/american-views-china-hit-all-time-low>.

71) Christine Huang, Laura Silver, and Laura Clancy, “Negative Views of China Have Softened Slightly Among Americans,” Pew Research Center, April 17, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/04/17/views-of-trade-between-china-and-the-us/>.

72) Wike et al., “Majorities of Americans Support Several – But Not All – Types of Foreign Aid,” Pew Research Center, May 1, 2025.

cooperation with China.⁷³ This, together with differing views on the war in Ukraine and thus on the Russian threat, reflects the prioritizer outlook within the Republican Party that places the China challenge first.

Figure 4. Countries Identified by Americans as the Greatest Enemy



(Source) Author's illustration based on data from Gallup. In addition to the four countries shown, a notable share of respondents also answered "United States itself," reaching 5% in 2024. Gallup, "U.S. Position in the World," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>.

To sum up, the loss of confidence in U.S. relative economic power, particularly during the 2000s and 2010s, formed the backdrop for the spread of America First thinking especially since the mid-2010s. China's rise has served as the key reference point for the growing awareness of U.S. relative decline. The Trump administration responds to and amplifies this sense of crisis, while at the same time advancing a narrative that a shift to America First will preserve the United States' preeminent power position. There are also signs of a renewed appreciation of America's enduring strength amid the post-pandemic economic growth, and U.S. self-perception of national power remains fluid. The changing American self-perception of power merits close and sustained attention when attempting to understand the long-term shifts in U.S. foreign policy.

73) Laura Silver, Christine Huang, Laura Clancy, and Moira Fagan, "Americans Are Critical of China's Global Role: As Well as Its Relationship with Russia," Pew Research Center, April 12, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/04/12/americans-are-critical-of-chinas-global-role-as-well-as-its-relationship-with-russia/>.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified three features of the conception of national interest at the heart of the Trump administration's America First policy: a narrowing of geographic scope, a compression of time horizons, and a pursuit of relative gains. The first is a priority given to problems closer to home over issues overseas. At work here is a categorical rejection of promoting the liberal international order, and a desire to revise even the long-standing strategic commitments in key regions of the world. The second is a tendency to prioritize short-term gains over long-term relationship-building. This is starkly visible in trade negotiations and alliance management. It is also bound up with a strong aversion to international institutions. The third is a zero-sum worldview. This too is on full display in protectionist trade policies grounded in a narrative that the United States has been exploited while others have profited, and in concerns over burden-sharing with allies that "free-ride" on U.S. security commitments.

Tempting as it is to locate the origins of America First in earlier historical episodes such as the interwar period, historical analogy has its limits. Understanding today's America First demands attention above all to the context that connects directly to the present. The key here lies in U.S. self-perception of national power. Particularly over the 2000s and 2010s, perceptions of U.S. relative decline steadily spread, both in expert debate and in public opinion. China's rapid rise added force to this trend, and a sense of crisis emerged: in economic terms especially, the United States might soon lose its status as the world's preeminent power. This perception underpins the America First impulse to "Make America Great Again," and with it the inward-looking policy preferences and emphasis on relative gains.

Interestingly, however, signs are also emerging of a renewed appreciation of America's enduring strength amid the post-pandemic economic recovery. Whether this reflects expectations and wishful thinking surrounding the second Trump administration, or a sober assessment of trends in economic, military, and technological competition, is difficult to judge. Nonetheless, U.S. self-perception is not uniformly pessimistic. Whether a return to a more confident self-perception would lead to a retreat from America First thinking, however, is highly questionable. If the prolonged downturn in self-perception lay at the root of the shift toward America First thinking, a modest, short-term upturn in American self-confidence is unlikely to alter the orientation of the Trump administration's outlook.

It seems clear that, under the Trump administration, the America First

turn in U.S. policy is one of the factors driving competitive pluralization in the Indo-Pacific. The traditional security architecture of this region has rested on the assumption of deep, sustained U.S. engagement at the center of an extensive network of alliances and partnerships. As that assumption is shaken, regional states will naturally reconsider their security policies. As argued in this chapter, however, the Trump administration's America First policy is less an effort to sever ties with the world than to recalibrate them in America's favor. There is therefore continuity as well as rupture. Both America First thinking and U.S. self-perception of national power remain highly fluid, and the analysis offered here is neither exhaustive nor final. With its mix of varied elements, the Trump administration's foreign policy will likely remain a challenge both for policy and scholarship for a long time to come.

It is an open question to what extent other countries in the Indo-Pacific region prove willing to accommodate the shift in U.S. foreign policy. That is a question to which neither the United States nor regional states yet have a clear answer. For example, Japan and South Korea have answered positively to calls to increase their defense spending, because they recognize it as something necessary to counter the rising threats from China and North Korea. One key question about burden-sharing is whether the United States will reduce its own defense resource allocation to the Indo-Pacific as regional states shoulder a larger role. Judging from the prioritizer logic within the Trump administration and from the actual policies during the first year of the second Trump administration, this seems unlikely. Were such a reduction to occur, however, it would deepen doubts about the U.S. commitment more powerfully than any statement by President Trump could. It might accelerate the region's pluralization in which many countries begin to see the United States less as the one indispensable leader than as one of several important partners.

America First and Realism

It is unusual for the U.S. government to invoke realism as a guiding principle. The 2017 NSS, issued under the first Trump administration, branded its underlying outlook “principled realism.”¹ As that document put it, this approach “acknowledges the central role of power in international politics, affirms that sovereign states are the best hope for a peaceful world, and clearly defines our national interests.” This thinking carries over into the 2025 NSS of the second Trump administration, where it appears under the banner of “flexible realism.”² The emphasis there is that interstate relations should not be defined by affinity (or difference) between domestic political systems and that the United States will no longer promote democracy. A. Wess Mitchell, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs in the first Trump administration, rejects the “idealist” U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War that was geared toward creating a world federation through international rules and institutions.³ Instead, he calls for the return to “diplomacy in its classical form,” which focuses on the balance of power.⁴ There are also some prominent realist scholars, such as Randall Schweller, who advocate the Trump administration’s foreign policy approach.⁵

Mitchell’s framing is reminiscent of the so-called First Debate between realists and idealists at the dawn of international relations as an academic discipline.⁶ As E. H. Carr once charged, the international institutions centered on the League of Nations proved powerless to prevent World War II, and the intellectual current shifted as realists like Carr

1) 2017 NSS, 55.

2) 2025 NSS, 9.

3) A. Wess Mitchell, “The Return of Great-Power Diplomacy: How Strategic Dealmaking Can Fortify American Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025): 24-39.

4) *Ibid.*, 26.

5) Randall Schweller, “Three Cheers for Trump’s Foreign Policy: What the Establishment Misses,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018): 133-143.

6) Various accounts have been advanced, but the Second Debate is generally said to have pitted traditionalism, with its emphasis on historical interpretation, against scientism, which sought the construction of general theory; and the Third Debate, positivism, which emphasizes hypothesis-testing on the basis of empirical data, against post-positivism, which emphasizes the social processes by which knowledge is constructed.

and Morgenthau “won” the debate.⁷ Today’s circumstances differ from that era in that no catastrophic showdown on the scale of World War II has occurred. Yet the message is much the same: U.S. foreign policy should be guided by the balance of power principles, rather than the endless ideological crusade for spreading democracy and promoting a liberal international order.

As a school of thought, realism is not a singular theory but a family of theories and concepts. Running through them, however, is a common worldview of power politics: in an anarchic environment without central authority, each state pursues its own self-interest and seeks to enhance its relative power position. The Trump administration’s messaging deliberately tracks this worldview.⁸ Indeed, the America First foreign policy outlook discussed in this chapter has much in common with realist thought. The emphasis on relative gains, for example, was a central realist position in the so-called neo-neo debate that pitted neoliberal institutionalism against neorealism.⁹

One major challenge that arises for America First as realist policy in practice concerns the time horizon. Realism does not necessarily assume a one-shot interaction, like the prisoner’s dilemma, where states simply attempt to maximize their immediate gains without considering long-term consequences. Rather, rational states would anticipate the opponent’s reactions and work to mitigate the dilemmas that may produce undesirable outcomes.¹⁰ Even John Mearsheimer, who argues that states’ power maximization behavior easily creates such dilemmas, posits that states carefully calculate the potential costs and benefits of their actions.¹¹ If the pursuit of short-term gains undermines greater

-
- 7) E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Yosef Lapid, “The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era,” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1989): 235-254; Brian C. Schmidt, “Anarchy, World Politics and the Birth of a Discipline: American International Relations, Pluralist Theory and the Myth of Interwar Idealism,” *International Relations* 16, no. 1 (2002): 9-31.
 - 8) Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). Space does not permit a detailed treatment here, but on debates over the definition of realism, see, for example, Ken Booth, “Realism Redux: Contexts, Concepts, Contests,” in *Realism and World Politics*, ed. Ken Booth (Routledge, 2011), 1-14; Jack Donnelly, “Realism,” in *Theories of International Relations*, 5th ed., eds. Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 32-56.
 - 9) Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation”; Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions.”
 - 10) Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 50-90; Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Dale C. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
 - 11) Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.
-

long-term gains, that can only be called irrational.

Alliance management is likely to be one of the most important touchstones in this regard. In an emerging bipolar system, the long-term strategic competition with a peer competitor like China requires the United States to manage its alliances effectively. The existing alliance network gives Washington a distinct advantage that Beijing does not possess. Yet making unilateral demands for concessions from allies sits uneasily with that strategic imperative. If pushed to extremes, demands for military burden-sharing may encourage greater allied autonomy and erode U.S. influence, while economic pressure imposed through tariffs may discourage allies from deferring to U.S. leadership. To be sure, such unwelcome pressure will not necessarily lead allies simply to walk away, so long as their relationship with the United States remains essential to their own security. The task, then, is to discern the fine line at which the United States can pursue the America First approach without fundamentally undermining long-term cooperation with its key strategic partners. If the Trump administration's foreign policy aspires to be realist, its success hinges on whether it can anticipate the dilemmas and trade-offs inherent in international politics and strike an appropriate balance.



The Development of China's Global South Diplomacy and Great Power Rivalry

YAMAGUCHI Shinji

Chapter 2

President Xi Jinping with leaders of participating countries at the military parade commemorating the 80th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan
(Photo: Xinhua/ABACA/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

Against the backdrop of intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, the Xi Jinping administration has placed significant emphasis on Global South diplomacy. This approach has its origins in the strategic debates around 2013 and in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and it forms part of China's strategy toward the United States: one aimed at gradually eroding the U.S.-led international order over the long term and reshaping it into one more favorable to China. Concretely, this diplomacy seeks to weaken the U.S.-led order by advancing initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI), extending partnership diplomacy globally, and expanding BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). While this diplomacy promotes bloc formation in international relations, it simultaneously accelerates a competitive pluralization in which Global South states maintain relations with both the United States and China.

1. Introduction

China has been intensifying its Global South diplomacy. Given China's longstanding self-conception, this may not seem particularly surprising. China has consistently identified itself as "the world's largest developing country" and has long positioned itself as a representative of the developing world that levels criticism at the developed countries.¹

Yet when one considers the actual priorities of Chinese foreign policy, the intensification of Global South diplomacy can be viewed as a significant shift. Since the era of Deng Xiaoping, the central axis of Chinese diplomacy has been great power diplomacy: relations with major powers have, arguably, received more attention than relations with developing countries. During the period of reform and opening-up under Deng's leadership, the foremost priority was securing the capital and technology required for economic development from abroad. To that end, while the rhetoric of being "the world's largest developing country" was maintained, diplomacy with developed countries and great powers took precedence in practice.² Now, however, the focus of Chinese diplomacy has shifted toward developing countries. This is not to say that China has come to neglect great power diplomacy. Nevertheless, the intensification of Global South diplomacy has measurably altered the relative balance of Chinese diplomacy.

Why, then, has China come to prioritize diplomacy with the Global South under Xi Jinping? How should we understand the origins and drivers of this shift? The aim of this chapter is not only to make sense of China's Global South diplomacy in its own right, but also to use it as a window onto the broader contours of China's foreign strategy in an age of great power competition shaped by intensifying U.S.-China rivalry.

This chapter argues that the intensification of China's Global South diplomacy is part of a strategy that reflects deepening rivalry among the great powers. Its origins can be traced to China's foreign policy debates around 2013 and the new diplomatic initiatives that followed. As U.S.-China rivalry has subsequently deepened, the importance of Global South policy

-
- 1) Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Kida Shojiro, *Mo Takuto no Gaiko: Chugoku to Daisan Sekai* [Mao Zedong's Diplomacy: China and the Third World] (Tokyo: Horitsu Bunkasha, 1992).
 - 2) See, for example, "Di shi ci zhuwai shijie huiyi zai Beijing juxing Hu Jintao fabiao zhongyao jianghua" [10th Conference of Diplomatic Envoys Stationed Abroad Held in Beijing; Hu Jintao Delivers Important Speech], *People's Daily*, August 30, 2004.

has risen accordingly. This implies that China's Global South policy is best understood as a diplomatic effort to gradually erode the U.S.-led international order over the long term and reshape it into one more favorable to China. In that sense, China's Global South diplomacy must be situated in a somewhat different context from the diversification and pluralization of diplomacy that other chapters examine.

Earlier scholarship on China's Global South diplomacy leaves room for further examination, particularly with respect to its place within China's diplomatic strategy in great power competition.³ In his 2013 book, David Shambaugh argued that China's expansion of global influence had been limited and that, in this sense, China was a "partial power."⁴ However, Shambaugh focused mainly on China's global diplomacy in the 2000s, and what bears watching is the trajectory of China's diplomacy since then. Scholarship on China's partnership diplomacy as part of its alignment behavior has tended to dwell excessively on whether such partnerships constitute a form of military alliance, and has thus proved insufficient for analyzing China's Global South diplomacy, which itself emphasizes the principle of non-alignment.⁵ On China's grand strategy in the era of great power competition, there is the work of Rush Doshi, but his analysis does not concretely specify how the phase of seizing hegemony would manifest, and his treatment of Global South diplomacy within that phase remains underdeveloped.⁶ In light of these concerns, this chapter approaches its analysis primarily from the Chinese perspective, drawing chiefly on Chinese official documents, scholarly works produced in China, and media debates within the country.

A note on terminology is in order here. China has positioned itself as "the world's largest developing country" and has long defined itself as a representative of the developing world. When the term "Global South"

3) On China's Global South policy, see Yatsuzuka Masaaki, ed., *NIDS China Security Report 2025: The Rising Global South and China*, English edition (Tokyo: NIDS, 2025); Aoyama Rumi, "'Jineika' suru sekai to Chugoku no gurobaru sausu seisaku" ['Bloc Formation' in the World and China's Global South Policy], *Kokusai Mondai* [International Affairs], no. 711: 37-48; Dawn C. Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

4) David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5) Ketian Zhang, "Alliances with Chinese Characteristics? The Contents and Rationale of China's Strategic Partnerships," *International Politics*, June 2, 2025.

6) Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

began to gain wide international currency around 2022–2023, China was not using the term very actively.⁷ This appears to have stemmed from a perception that the term was a Western device aimed at dividing the developing world. Subsequently, however, China itself began identifying as a member of the Global South and adopting the term actively. This chapter refers to China's diplomacy toward emerging economies and developing countries as “Global South diplomacy,” even for the period when China itself was not using the term.

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 examines the development of China's Global South diplomacy from several angles, addressing in particular China's diplomatic initiatives, bilateral partnership diplomacy, and multilateral diplomacy. Section 3 analyzes the formation of China's Global South diplomacy by tracing its immediate origins in the foreign policy debates around 2013, the new diplomatic initiatives that followed, and their subsequent evolution. Section 4 analyzes what features China's Global South diplomacy displays when viewed as alignment behavior. It does so from three perspectives: historical continuity, the theoretical positioning of this diplomacy as a strategy toward the United States, and its implications for the analysis of contemporary international relations.

2. The Xi Jinping Administration's Emphasis on Global South Diplomacy

The Xi Jinping administration has been pursuing a diplomacy that prioritizes the Global South. This emphasis is evident in the development of concepts associated with Global South diplomacy, the expansion of partnership diplomacy, and recent trends in multilateral diplomacy.

(1) Global Initiatives

The Xi Jinping administration has put forward four such initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and the Global Governance Initiative (GGI). These China-promoted global initiatives are presented as a “strategic

7) Kawashima Shin, “Chugoku kara mita ‘gurobaru sausu (quanqiu nanfang)’” [The Global South Viewed from China's Perspective], *Anzen Hoshō Kenkyū* [Security Studies] 5, no. 4 (December 2023): 27–40; Liu Jiangwei and Sity Daud, “Trends and Trajectories in ‘Global South’ Research: A Comparative Study of CNKI and WOS Database Publications,” *Frontiers in Political Science*, March 13, 2025.

guidance” for realizing China’s vision of global governance, namely the “community with a shared future for mankind.”

Each is offered as China’s response to a fundamental issue: development, security, ideology, and international order, respectively.

1) The Global Development Initiative (GDI)

The GDI was unveiled in September 2021 and is positioned as a means of supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It sets out six core principles: (1) development as a priority, (2) a people-centered approach, (3) inclusiveness and benefits for all, (4) innovation-driven development, (5) harmony between man and nature, and (6) results-oriented actions.⁸ To advance this initiative, China has established the “Global Development Project Pool,” the “Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund,” and the “China-UN Peace and Development Fund.”

2) The Global Security Initiative (GSI)

The GSI is a concept put forward in April 2022. It criticizes the U.S. alliance network as a small grouping rooted in Cold War-era military alliance thinking, and underscores the need for “comprehensive security.” China has set out “six commitments” as core principles: (1) commitment to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, (2) commitment to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, (3) commitment to abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, (4) commitment to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously, (5) commitment to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, and (6) commitment to maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.⁹ Its strategic objective is to challenge the legitimacy of the U.S. alliance system.

8) “Xi Jinping zai di qishiliu jie Lianheguo dahui yibanxing bianlun shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping’s Speech at the General Debate of the 76th UN General Assembly (full text)], *Xinhua Net*, September 22, 2021, http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2021-09/22/c_11278867524.htm.

9) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,” February 21, 2023, http://www.news.cn/world/2023-02/21/c_1129382628.htm.

3) The Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)

Announced in March 2023, the GCI is a concept that challenges the notion of universal human rights and instead promotes the flexible application of diverse “common values.” Its basic principles are: (1) respect for the diversity of civilizations, (2) advocacy for the common values of humanity, (3) emphasis on the importance of inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and (4) strengthening international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation.¹⁰ Its principal ideological aim is to displace the concept of “universal values” (which China criticizes as bound up with liberal democracy and human rights) with that of “common values of humanity” (peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom). Within this framework, the meanings of terms such as “democracy” and “freedom” are relativized and held to be properly defined within the distinctive context of each civilization.

4) The Global Governance Initiative (GGI)

President Xi Jinping unveiled the GGI at the SCO Plus Summit in September 2025. It is presented as a culminating initiative that provides an institutional roadmap for the new world order envisioned by the other three initiatives. Underlying it is the assessment that the current global governance system stands at a new crossroads, suffers from a “governance deficit,” and fails to reflect the rise of the Global South.¹¹ The GGI is built on five principles: (1) commitment to sovereign equality, (2) commitment to international rule of law, (3) commitment to multilateralism, (4) commitment to the people-centered approach, and (5) commitment to real results. At the core of its agenda are the strengthening of the representation and voice of the Global South in global institutions such as the United Nations, the WTO, and international financial institutions, together with the assertion of a strict interpretation of the UN Charter's principles of sovereignty and non-

10) [China] State Council, “Xi Jinping zai Zhongguo Gongchandang yu shijie zhengdang gaoceng duihuahui shang de zhuzhi jianghua (quanwen)” [Keynote Speech by Xi Jinping at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting (full text)], March 15, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2023-03/15/content_5746950.htm.

11) “Cong xitong he quanyu bawo jianxing quanqiu zhili changyi” [Implementing the Global Governance Initiative through a Systemic and Comprehensive Approach], *People's Daily*, October 10, 2025.

interference in internal affairs.¹² Through this initiative, China appears to be pursuing the aim of advancing the transformation of the international order under its own leadership.

(2) The Global Expansion of Partnership Diplomacy

China has pursued partnership diplomacy since the 1990s. Centered on strategic partnerships, this approach has sought to build sustained and broad-based friendly relations with other countries that fall short of formal alliances. Through the 2000s, because the focus of Chinese diplomacy lay in great power diplomacy, partnerships were largely formed with great powers and developed countries.

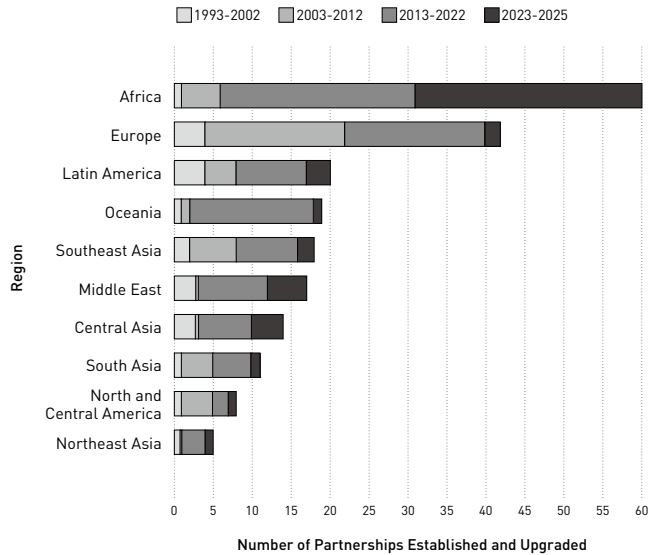
The Xi Jinping administration has extended these partnerships globally, actively expanding them to the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific Island countries. At the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in 2014, President Xi called for “building a global partnership network,” and he has since pushed to strengthen partnership diplomacy. Since the start of the twenty-first century, China has rapidly increased the number of partnership relationships it has concluded. Under the Xi administration, it has extended these to Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania while also systematizing them.¹³

A particularly notable feature is that partnerships, previously confined to great powers and neighboring states, have now been expanded globally. As Figure 1 shows, this has been especially pronounced in the building of relationships with Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania.

12) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Global Governance Initiative Concept Paper,” September 1, 2025.

13) Li Boyi, “Zhongguo huoban waijiao de bianhua” [Changes in China’s Partnership Diplomacy], *Zhanlue Juece Yanjiu* [Journal of Strategy and Decision-making], no. 3 (2021): 36-66.

Figure 1. Number of Partnerships Established and Upgraded by China, by Region and Period



(Source) Author's illustration based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website.

(3) Prioritizing the Global South in Multilateral Diplomacy: The Expansion of BRICS Plus and the SCO

Third, in China's multilateral diplomacy, one can observe a tendency toward institutional expansion together with an emphasis on the Global South. What follows considers the expansion of BRICS and the SCO, the two organizations that lie at the heart of China's multilateral diplomacy.

1) Promoting BRICS Expansion

Founded in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, and China, BRICS was joined by South Africa in 2011. In 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates were admitted as members, followed by Indonesia in 2025. A separate category of partner countries now includes Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Nigeria, and Vietnam, among others.

It was China that actively advocated this BRICS expansion. China put forward the “BRICS Plus” formula in 2017, and the proposal subsequently gained traction. China’s role in the 2023 round of BRICS expansion was particularly significant.¹⁴ China strongly supported the admission of new members such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, with the aim of enhancing BRICS’s international standing and influence.

China’s principal motive for promoting BRICS expansion lies in its emphasis on the Global South and its determination to exert leadership there. Beijing regards BRICS as a valuable and singular mechanism for engaging with the Global South. In July 2023, ahead of the BRICS Summit, China’s top diplomat, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, described BRICS as “the most important platform for cooperation among emerging markets and developing countries.”¹⁵

BRICS provides China with a useful venue for portraying itself as a champion of the developing world. President Xi underscored this role in his speech at the 2023 BRICS Summit, declaring: “China has always shared the same breath and destiny with the developing countries... and will forever be a member of the developing countries.”¹⁶ China positions BRICS as an important platform for South-South cooperation and seeks, through its expansion, to give the voices of Global South countries greater weight on the international stage. A commentary from the state news agency Xinhua observed: “The expanded BRICS has now grown into the ‘front line’ of the Global South. Within the great currents of history, an ever-greater number of developing countries are moving from political awakening and economic development toward global solidarity, gradually converging on the Global

14) Emmanuel Frimpong Sarpong and Hagan Sibiri, “Building a Bloc from BRICS: Assessing China’s Strategic Interests and Influence,” Africa Policy Research Institute, December 19, 2024, <https://afripoli.org/building-a-bloc-from-brics-assessing-chinas-strategic-interests-and-influence>.

15) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Wang Yi huijian Jinzhuang andaihui Nanfei qiantouren, Nanfei zongtongfu buzhang Entshaweini” [Wang Yi Meets with the South African Coordinator of the BRICS National Security Advisers Meeting, South African Minister in the Presidency Ntshavheni], July 26, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202307/t20230726_11117821.shtml.

16) “Xi Jinping zai ‘Jinzhuang+’ lingdaoren duihuahui shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping’s Address at the ‘BRICS Plus’ Leaders’ Dialogue (full text)], *Xinhua*, August 24, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202308/content_6899939.htm.

South as a major force driving change in the international order.”¹⁷

For many small and medium-sized developing countries, the BRICS vision of a more democratic and equitable multipolar world order is attractive, and many states have signaled an interest in joining. By championing the “BRICS Plus” model and expanding cooperation between BRICS members and non-members, China appears to be seeking to consolidate its own leadership within the Global South.¹⁸ In this sense, BRICS expansion is a strategic move for China to push back against the Western-led international order and to construct a more multipolar world order. Drawing into BRICS resource-rich states that find themselves uneasy with a Western-centered order represents the concrete expression of that strategy.¹⁹

2) The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in 2001 on the foundation of the Shanghai Five, was set up with counterterrorism as its central purpose, comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

With the accession of India and Pakistan in 2017, the SCO's character shifted from a Central Asia-centered grouping to a more pan-Eurasian organization.²⁰ Li Xiaotian argues that the SCO upholds a sovereignty norm centered on “non-interference in internal affairs” and is following a “statist” developmental trajectory. This stance gives clear expression to the principles of respect for sovereignty and non-interference that many developing countries prioritize, and distinguishes it from older forms of regionalism (such as the EU) that aspire to Western-centric democratic norms and

17) “Nanfang chao qi zheng yangfan: Jiema jinzhuan hezuo xingwen zhiyuan de chenggong zhi dao” [The South Rises and Sets Sail: Decoding How BRICS Cooperation Has Achieved Steady, Far-Reaching Success], *Xinhua*, October 26, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202410/content_6982958.htm.

18) Wen Wang and Chen Long, “A New Era of ‘Greater BRICS Cooperation’: The Future of the World and China’s Role,” *BRICS Journal of Economics* 5, no. 4 (2024): 37-54.

19) Marcin Przychodniak, “China Building Up BRICS as Important Foreign Policy Tool,” *PISM Bulletin*, February 28, 2025, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/china-building-up-brics-as-important-foreign-policy-tool>; Brice Tseen Fu Lee and Juan Pablo Sims, “Legitimacy Through Diversity: China’s Leadership in the BRICS Plus Expansion for Global Balance,” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (May 2024).

20) Li Ziguo, “Shanghai hezuo zuzhi de kuoyuan yu mingyun gongtongti jianshe” [The Expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Construction of a Community with a Shared Future], *E Luosi Dong Ou Zhong Ya yanjiu*, no. 4 (2021): 7-28.

supranational governance institutions.²¹

Iran joined in 2023, and Belarus followed in 2024. Iran's accession dramatically expanded the SCO's cooperative space and geopolitical reach, extending its footprint to West Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea.²²

The SCO has institutional categories for observer states and dialogue partners. Observer states have included Mongolia (2004); India, Pakistan, and Iran (2005); Afghanistan (2012); and Belarus (2015). All but Mongolia and Afghanistan have since become full members. The dialogue partner category, established as a preliminary stage toward observer or full member status, has included Sri Lanka and Belarus (2009); Turkey (2012); Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, and Armenia (2015); Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia (2021); Kuwait, the Maldives, Myanmar, the UAE, and Bahrain (2023); and Laos (2025).

Now stretching across the Eurasian continent, the SCO has become an important framework in the context of Global South diplomacy. As noted above, the venue for the launch of the Global Governance Initiative was an SCO Plus meeting. Admittedly, the entry of India and Pakistan has substantially reduced the likelihood that the SCO will act in unison. Even so, the SCO's importance as an organization centered outside the United States and Europe is likely to continue growing.

3. The Formation of China's Global South Strategy

(1) Strategic Debates, 2012–2015

1) Shifting Great Power Relations

China's growing emphasis not only on great power relations but also on diplomacy with the developing world appears to have been triggered by changes in great power relations themselves. Specifically, the deterioration of China's security environment and the strategic debates it prompted gave rise to an impulse to give greater weight to diplomacy with countries on China's periphery and beyond.

From Xi Jinping's elevation to the post of CPC General Secretary

21) Li Xiaotian, "Shanghai hezuo zuzhi kuoyuan hou de diqu dingwei yu hezuo geju" [The Regional Positioning and Cooperation Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization after Expansion], *Guoji zhanwang*, no. 3 (2021): 96–118.

22) Guo Manruo, "Yilang jiaru Shanghe zuzhi: Zuoyongli, yingxiang ji tiaozhan" [Iran's Accession to the SCO: Impact, Influence, and Challenges], International Cooperation Center, May 16, 2023, <https://www.icc.org.cn/trends/mediareports/1679.html>.

through 2014, China's external relations in the Asia-Pacific deteriorated. In response to the Japanese government's purchase of the Senkaku Islands in 2012, China began routinely dispatching government vessels to the area. In 2013 it declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea and stepped up People's Liberation Army (PLA) activities. Sino-Japanese relations sank to what could be called their worst state since the normalization of diplomatic ties.²³ China's activities in the South China Sea also turned more assertive, and its relations with the Philippines and Vietnam deteriorated. The Barack Obama administration in the United States announced its "rebalance" to Asia and adopted a more Asia-focused stance, but its central thrust was to strengthen the U.S. presence in order to balance against China's rise and Beijing's increasingly coercive policies toward its neighbors.²⁴

With respect to the relationship with the United States, President Xi Jinping believed that decisive confrontation could be avoided by constructing what he termed a "new type of great power relations" between the United States and China. The "new type of great power relations" rests on three principles: (1) avoiding conflict, (2) respecting each other's core interests, and (3) building a win-win relationship. The concept aimed to prevent confrontation and build a stable relationship through compromise between the United States and China.²⁵ However, China's definition of "core interests" encompassed claims regarding its political system and territorial issues, and was not acceptable to the United States.

In this way, China's adoption of more assertive policies, primarily in the maritime domain, expanded friction with neighboring countries and the United States, and its security environment was steadily worsening.

23) Yamaguchi Shinji, "Japan's Encounters with China at Sea: The 2013 Fire-Control Radar Incident and Japan's China Strategy," in *Encounters and Escalation in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives on China's Military and Implications for Regional Security*, ed. Oriana Skylar Mastro, NBR Special Report no. 108 (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2024).

24) Mori Satoru, "Obama seiken no ribaransu to taichu seisaku" [The Obama Administration's Rebalance and China Policy], *Kokusai Anzenhoshō* [Journal of International Security] 41, no. 3 (2013): 29-45.

25) Kawashima Shin, "Kiro ni tatsu Shu Kinpei seiken no taigai seisaku rinen: Shingata taikoku kankēi to shingata kokusai kankēi" [Foreign Policy Ideology of the Xi Jinping Administration at a Crossroads: The New Type of Great Power Relations and the New Type of International Relations], *Chugoku Kenkyū Geppo* [Monthly journal of Chinese affairs] 74, no. 9 (September 2020): 18-25; Masuda Masayuki, "Pawa toranjishon ron to Chugoku no taibei seisaku: 'Shingata taikoku kankēi' ron no jutēn iko" [Power Transition Theory and China's Policy toward the United States: A Shift of Emphasis in the 'New Type of Great Power Relations' Discourse], *Kanagawa daigaku ajia rebyū*, no. 2 (2015): 70-80.

2) Debates over the Direction of Foreign Strategy

Amid these growing frictions and the deepening tensions with the United States, a debate emerged over the direction of China's foreign strategy.

The first concerned the necessity of alliances.²⁶

Those who saw alliances as necessary argued that, in light of changes in international relations, the non-alignment policy should be revised. As rivalry with the United States deepened and China's own power grew, they argued, there was no longer any need to remain reluctant to enter into alliances.²⁷

According to Zhang Weiwei, an associate professor at Northeast Normal University, in a situation of deepening competition with the United States and confrontation with a powerful adversary, securing reliable allies would yield additional security resources. Moreover, China's current cautious foreign policy could not serve as the policy line once China's rise was complete. In particular, alliances would become necessary as China sought more actively to build an international order favorable to itself.²⁸

Those who argued for preserving the non-alignment policy, by contrast, emphasized that alliances were not a rational choice for China. Ling Shengli, a professor at China Foreign Affairs University, argued that entering into an extremely competitive relationship with the United States and others at the present stage would not serve China's interests. In his view, if China were

26) On debates over alliances, see Lim Jaehwan, "Chugoku no shin domei ron: Anzen hoshō chitsujō no aratana seido senryaku" [China's New Alliance Theory: A New Institutional Strategy for the Security Order], in *Reisengo no Higashi Ajia chitsujō: Chitsujō keisei o meguru kakkoku no koso* [The Post-Cold War East Asian Order: National Visions for the Construction of Order], ed. Sahashi Ryo (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 2020), 255-272; Dong Yibing, "Zhongguo 'huoban guanxi zhanlüe' de gainian bianxi, jianli yuanyin ji qi xuejie taidu" [Conceptual Analysis of China's "Partnership Strategy," Its Origins, and Academic Attitudes toward It], *Jiangnan shehui xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Jiangnan Social University] 21, no. 3 (September 2021): 63-66.

27) For arguments calling for alliances or quasi-alliances, see Yan Xuetong, "Eluosi kekao ma?" [Is Russia Reliable?], *Guoji jingji pinglun* [International Economic Review], no. 3 (2012): 21-25; Sun Degang, "Lun xinshiqi Zhongguo de zhun lianmeng wajiao" [On China's Quasi-Alliance Diplomacy in the New Era], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], no. 3 (2012): 57-81.

28) Zhang Weiwei and Zheng Yue, "Chongxin lijie bu jiemeng: Zhongguo wajiao zhanlüe tiaozheng de yizhong kenengxing" [Rethinking Non-Alignment: One Possibility for Adjusting China's Diplomatic Strategy], *Liaoning daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* [Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)] 49, no. 2 (March 2021): 147-155.

to abandon partnership diplomacy in favor of alliances, military-centered security competition would intensify and a confrontational pattern of international relations would take shape.²⁹

Ling underscored that partnerships are clearly distinct from military alliances. Specifically, (1) the principal aim of partnerships is not to strengthen security cooperation; (2) partnerships are a global trend rather than a Chinese-specific concept; (3) security cooperation with partners centers on military exchanges and mutual trust-building, and does not extend to substantive institutions or plans for military cooperation; and (4) while it is not impossible for partnerships to evolve into alliances, such evolution depends on many conditions.

The second debate concerned strategic direction.

Wang Jisi, a professor at Peking University's School of International Studies, advanced a "*Xijin*" (March Westward) approach in 2012.³⁰ He argued that China's strategic orientation should emphasize a westward push. At the time, amid maritime disputes off China's eastern seaboard involving the United States, the thrust of Wang's argument was that emphasizing political and economic activities to the west would enable China to advance its interests while avoiding direct U.S.-China confrontation. Wang's argument attracted broad attention. It proposed that, while continuing to face off with the United States in the eastern maritime arena, China should avoid direct collision and seek developmental space to the west.

In response, Major General Yang Yi of the Academy of Military Sciences put forward an argument on strategic direction encapsulated in the slogan "*Gu Bei, Wen Xi, An Dong, Tuo Nan*" (Consolidate the North, Stabilize the West, Calm the East, and Open Up the South). While agreeing with Wang's basic premises, Yang held that China need not focus solely on the west: in the north it should consolidate its position through partnership with Russia; in the west it should prioritize stability with the SCO at the core; in the east it should resist U.S. pressure while seeking a breakthrough into the Pacific; and in the south it should pursue new frontiers in Southeast Asia and India.³¹ Wang's argument thus stimulated a wider debate on China's strategic direction.

29) Ling Shengli, "Zhongguo weishenme bu jiemeng?" [Why Does China Not Form Alliances?], *Waijiao pinglun* [Foreign Affairs Review], no. 3 (2013): 20-33.

30) Wang Jisi, "'Xijin,' Zhongguo diyuan zhanlue de zai pingheng" ["Marching West": A Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy], *Global Times*, October 17, 2012.

31) Yang Yi, "Zhoubian anquan xuyao quanfangwei zhanlue" [Peripheral security requires an omnidirectional strategy], *Global Times*, October 26, 2012.

Many Chinese scholarly works have noted that Wang's "march westward" thesis served as a precursor to the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the "Silk Road Economic Belt."³² However, the policies that China actually pursued thereafter, while drawing on the ideas of the "march westward" school, took the form of a more global, omnidirectional pursuit of expansion.

In sum, Chinese foreign policy was beginning to explore new approaches with the changing security situation in Asia in mind.

3) New Diplomatic Initiatives

From 2013 onward, China rolled out a series of new diplomatic initiatives in rapid succession. These policies and statements were not a set of one-off measures but a coordinated strategic effort that would form the foundation of China's later Global South policy. Together they signaled that, across three dimensions (economic, diplomatic-ideational, and security-related), China was beginning to envision a new regional order centered on itself.

The first was the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative. In September 2013, in a speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, President Xi proposed the joint construction of a "Silk Road Economic Belt." Drawing on what he described as the ancient Silk Road's spirit of peace, friendship, openness, and inclusiveness, Xi called for deepening economic cooperation across the Eurasian continent through the "*Wu Tong*" (Five Connectivities): policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people connectivity.³³ The following month, in October, he unveiled the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" initiative in Indonesia. Combined as the "Belt and Road Initiative," these two concepts went beyond seeking outlets abroad for China's excess industrial capacity. They were tied to a geopolitical intent to enhance Eurasian connectivity and to build a vast economic sphere with

32) Zhao Huasheng, "'Sichou zhi lu jingji dai' de guanzhu dian ji qieru dian" [Focus Points and Entry Points of the "Silk Road Economic Belt"], *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* [Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Edition of Philosophy and Social Sciences)] 35, no. 3 (June 2014): 27-35; Zhao Lei et al., "'Yidai yilu' xuyao 'yuan lilun'" [The "Belt and Road" Needs an "Original Theory"], Belt and Road One Hundred Forum, December 7, 2018, https://aoc.ouc.edu.cn/_t719/2018/1207/c9821a230061/page.psp.

33) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Xi Jinping zai Nazha'erbayefu daxue de yanjiang (quanwen)" [Xi Jinping's Speech at Nazarbayev University (full text)], September 8, 2013, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/ywzt_675099/2013nzt_675233/xjpfcyghy_675259/zxxx_675261/201309/t20130908_9283228.shtml.

China as its hub.

The second was the convening of the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference. On October 24-25, 2013, the first work conference in Chinese history dedicated to “peripheral diplomacy” was held. At this conference, President Xi put forward the principles of “*Qin, Cheng, Hui, Rong*” (Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness) as the basic guidelines for relationship-building with neighboring countries. This approach emphasized that China's development would benefit neighboring states and sought to deepen friendly relations through economic appeal. The conference symbolized China's shift toward an active posture, prioritizing diplomacy with its surrounding region and seeking to construct a stable security environment by its own efforts. Xi declared that China would “vigorously advance peripheral diplomacy and strive to secure a favorable surrounding environment for our country,” signaling the deployment of more assertive foreign policy.³⁴

The third was the articulation of a new security concept. In May 2014, at the summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) held in Shanghai, President Xi delivered a keynote speech proposing a “New Asian Security Concept” built on the four pillars of “common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable” security. At its core was the assertion that “Asian affairs should be handled by the Asian people, and Asian security should be safeguarded by the Asian people.”³⁵ This implicitly criticized U.S.-led bilateral military alliances as “relics of the Cold War” and signaled a clear intent to push U.S. influence out of the Asian security order and construct a new framework centered on dialogue and cooperation among Asian states.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the global expansion of partnerships was indicated at the November 2014 Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference. Chinese foreign policy was thus beginning to alter its approach.

34) “Xi Jinping zai zhoubian waijiao gongzuo zuotanhui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua” [Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference], *Xinhua Net*, October 25, 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm.

35) “Xi Jinping zai Yazhou xianghu xiezuo yu xinren cuoshi huiyi disi ci fenghui shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping's Speech at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (full text)], *People's Daily*, May 22, 2014.

(2) Great Power Rivalry and the Global South, 2017–2022

It was in 2017 that China's diplomacy with the developing world received another major boost. That year saw the inauguration of the Donald Trump administration. Concerns about U.S. global leadership grew, and China perceived an expansion of opportunities for itself. Within China, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) consolidated General Secretary Xi Jinping's dominant position, enabling more vigorous pursuit of his policy agenda.

The Trump administration, which took office in January 2017, withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), adopted a skeptical stance toward international institutions, and moved to reexamine relations with allies, signaling a retreat from the role the United States had traditionally played as leader of the international order.

China saw this as an opportunity to position itself as a defender of globalization and multilateralism and to extend its influence in the international community. In his speeches at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017 and at the UN headquarters in Geneva, President Xi called for the building of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” opposed protectionism, and forcefully presented himself as a defender of an open world economy.³⁶ In May of the same year, the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing, with more than 140 countries (including 29 heads of state) and over 80 international organizations participating.

Domestically, the 19th National Congress of the CPC, held in October 2017, both consolidated the Xi regime and unveiled a more ambitious foreign policy agenda.³⁷ In his speech, General Secretary Xi noted that “the world is undergoing major developments, transformation, and adjustment,” and made clear that “the trends of global multi-polarity, economic globalization, IT application, and cultural diversity are surging forward.” By “global multi-polarity” Xi meant a shift in the global balance of power and a weakening of the U.S.-dominated unipolar system. Within these shifts in the balance

36) Xi Jinping, “Gong dan shidai zeren, gong cu quanqiu fazhan” [Sharing the Responsibilities of Our Times, Jointly Promoting Global Development], *Qiushi Net*, December 15, 2020.

37) On the 19th National Congress of the CPC, see Yamaguchi Shinji, “Chugoku Kyosanto dai-19-kai zenkoku daihyo taikai no kisoteki bunseki: 3 Chugoku no tokushoku aru taikoku gaiko” [Basic Analysis of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: (3) Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics], *NIDS Commentary*, November 13, 2017.

of power, he observed that “changes in the global governance system and the international order are speeding up; countries are becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent; [and] relative international forces are becoming more balanced.” Against this backdrop, Xi emphasized that “China follows the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration in engaging in global governance,” and “stands for democracy in international relations.” Furthermore, he underscored that “China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country, [and] take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system.”³⁸

At the September 2017 BRICS Summit, President Xi proposed a new cooperation model under the rubric of “BRICS Plus.” At its core was the deepening of dialogue and cooperation with emerging-market and developing countries, the promotion of South-South cooperation, and the construction of broader partnerships through the “BRICS Plus” framework.³⁹

The move toward the BRICS Plus concept had been clearly signaled from early 2017. On March 9, 2017, at the Fifth Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress, Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared: “In terms of South-South cooperation, we will explore the modality of ‘BRICS Plus.’ By holding outreach dialogues with other major developing countries and organizations of developing countries, we hope to establish a more extensive partnership, widen the BRICS’ circle of friends and turn the BRICS into the most impactful platform for South-South cooperation.” His statement made plain China's intent to enlarge its international influence through the expansion of BRICS. The remarks reveal a Chinese strategy aimed at evolving BRICS beyond a mere economic cooperation framework into an actor exerting broader influence in international politics.⁴⁰

38) [China] State Council, “Xi Jinping: Juesheng quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui, duoqu xinshidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi weida shengli: Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang dishijiu ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao” [Xi Jinping: Securing a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Achieving the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China], October 27, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

39) “Xi Jinping Jinzhuan guojia lingdaoren Xiamen huiwu jizhehui shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping's Speech at the Press Conference of the BRICS Leaders' Xiamen Summit (full text)], *Xinhua*, September 5, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-09/05/content_5222821.htm.

40) “Wang Yi: Yao tansuo ‘Jinzhuan+’ moshi, kuoda Jinzhuan guojia ‘pengyou quan’” [Wang Yi: We Should Explore the ‘BRICS Plus’ Model and Expand the BRICS Countries’ ‘Circle of Friends’], *People's Daily Online*, March 9, 2017, <http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2017/n1/2017/0309/c410899-29132933.html>.

In 2018, the Trump administration imposed large-scale additional tariffs on China, and the U.S.-China trade war began in earnest. As U.S.-China rivalry hardened, China continued to strengthen its ties with emerging and developing economies. The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020, dealt a severe blow to the global economy, but China sought to use the moment to expand its influence. Having achieved success in containing the virus domestically in the early stages of the pandemic, and as the United States and others turned inward, China actively supplied masks, medical equipment, and later vaccines to developing countries in what came to be known as its “vaccine diplomacy.” The aim was to improve China’s image and strengthen its relationships, particularly in the developing world.⁴¹ In his September 2021 address to the UN General Assembly, President Xi pledged free vaccine provisions to developing countries and contributions to the “COVAX Facility,” presenting China as a leader in the global public health crisis.⁴²

(3) Global Upheaval and Global South Diplomacy, 2022 Onward

The Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in February 2022, served as a fresh catalyst. While the United States, Europe, and Japan ramped up their condemnation of Russia and tightened economic sanctions, China took a markedly different line, deploying a diplomacy aimed at peeling Global South countries away from the United States.

A look at Chinese diplomacy in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine reveals an intensification of activity directed at the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. From late March, after the Russian invasion, Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a tour of Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Nepal, and also chaired the Third Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan in Tunxi, Anhui Province.

At a joint press conference with Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra, Wang stated: “I have exchanged views with many foreign ministers of Asian and African countries. I feel that many countries, like China, are following closely the developments of the Ukraine crisis, and share a lot of common language.” His remarks highlighted the convergence

41) Ian Tsung-yen Chen, “The Crisis of COVID-19 and the Political Economy of China’s Vaccine Diplomacy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 3 (July 2022).

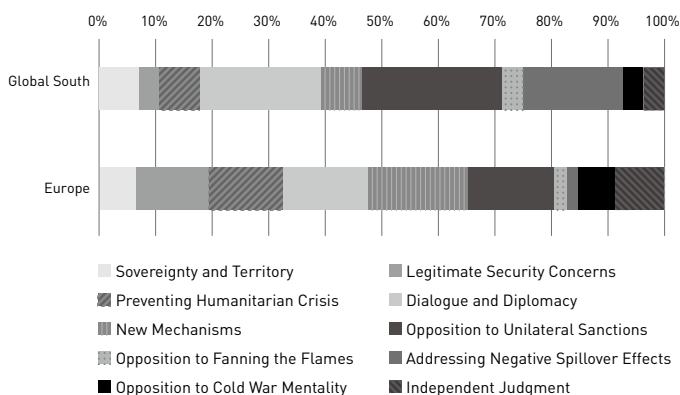
42) [China] State Council, “Xi Jinping zai di qishiliu jie Lianheguo dahui yibanxing bianlun shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping’s Speech at the General Debate of the 76th UN General Assembly (full text)], September 22, 2021, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-09/22/content_5638597.htm.

of views between Asian and African states and China.

As shown in Figure 2, China has emphasized to emerging economies its preference for a peaceful resolution, its opposition to sanctions, and its rejection of any spillover of the Ukraine situation into other regions.⁴³ This appears to be an effort to identify as much common ground as possible with countries unwilling to side with either the West or Russia, and to enlarge the ranks of the neutral. By creating the impression that the entire world has not united in condemning Russia, China can also be seen as indirectly supporting Russia's position.

Most importantly, the points China emphasized in its diplomacy following the war's outbreak directly prefigured the Global Security Initiative. Several principles later embedded in the GSI were already in evidence in Chinese diplomacy at this time: commitment to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; commitment to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; commitment to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; and commitment to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation.

Figure 2. Frequency of Mentions in Foreign Ministerial Meetings: Comparison Between the Global South and Europe (February 24–April 6, 2022)



(Source) Author's illustration based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website.

43) Yamaguchi Shinji, "Chugoku to Roshia Ukuraina senso: Chu-Ro tai-Bei teikei no shinka to genkai" [China and the Russia-Ukraine War: The Deepening and Limitation of China-Russia Cooperation against the United States], *NIDS Commentary*, May 12, 2022.

Underlying these arguments was the Chinese leadership's framing of the international situation as "great changes unseen in a century."⁴⁴ This view rests on several major global trends. First, the rapid rise of China and other emerging economies has produced a shift in the balance of power captured in the phrase "the East is rising and the West is declining." Second, U.S. hegemony has experienced a relative decline. Third, the international system as a whole has entered a period of restructuring. Unlike the sharply defined bipolar structure of the Cold War, the present moment combines U.S.-China rivalry between two great powers with a broader trend toward multipolarity.⁴⁵ China's central aim is to further accelerate the dismantling of U.S. hegemony by strengthening its alignment with the Global South.

4. Analysis of China's Alignment Behavior

How, then, should China's Global South policy be situated within a broader perspective? This section explores its position in historical context, its role as a strategy toward the United States, and the influence it exerts on contemporary international relations.

(1) Historical Context

Contemporary China's Global South diplomacy is not an entirely new policy that began under Xi Jinping. Its intellectual lineage can be traced back to the Mao Zedong era. At that time, China placed solidarity with what would today be called the Global South at the heart of its diplomacy and sought to exercise ideological influence.

During the Mao era, China advanced the "theory of intermediate zones," which emphasized the importance of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The theory held that between the two great blocs of the United States and the Soviet Union lay a vast array of countries that constituted the principal battleground of struggle. By fomenting revolution in this intermediate zone, China sought to advance a worldwide struggle and prevail in the Cold War.⁴⁶ The theory's significance lay in its emphasis on the importance of the

44) Doshi, *Long Game*, 358-366.

45) "Yi jianqiang zhanlue dingli yingdui bainian wei you zhi da bianju" [Responding to the Great Changes Unseen in a Century with Firm Strategic Resolve], *Zhongguo Jijian Jiancha Bao* [China Discipline Inspection and Supervision News], February 18, 2021.

46) Uno Shigeaki, *Chugoku to kokusai kankei* [China and International Relations] (Kyoto: Koyo Shobo, 1981), 75-85.

countries in the middle within U.S.-Soviet great power competition.

As the Sino-Soviet split deepened, the theory was further developed and systematized as the “Three Worlds” theory, which Deng Xiaoping officially articulated in a UN speech in 1974. The theory categorized the world into three parts: the United States and the Soviet Union, the superpowers contending for hegemony, were placed in the “First World”; the developed countries such as Japan and Western Europe formed the “Second World”; and the broad swath of developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America made up the “Third World.”⁴⁷

Within this framework, China positioned itself as a member of the “Third World” and its natural leader. Although China was then economically poor and internationally isolated, it argued that for that very reason it represented the majority of the oppressed world and possessed the moral legitimacy to oppose superpower hegemonism. Symbolic aid projects such as the construction of the TAZARA Railway linking Tanzania and Zambia, along with support for African national liberation movements, gave concrete form to this theory.

With the advent of the Deng Xiaoping era, this ideologically charged diplomacy receded into the background. From the 1990s onward, Deng, who placed reform and opening-up at the top of the agenda, prioritized cooperation with the major powers and concentrated on domestic economic development under the policy of “*Taoguang yanghui*” (Keeping a Low Profile). Relations with the developing world shifted from ideological solidarity toward more practical economic cooperation.

This line was largely maintained under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, with South-South cooperation pursued primarily through the lens of mutual economic benefit. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000, is emblematic of this approach. FOCAC was the first major multilateral forum that China established outside its immediate region, and it represented a pathbreaking effort to institutionalize relations with Africa around economic cooperation.⁴⁸ During this period, however, although China's diplomacy with the developing world was framed as “the foundation of (Chinese diplomacy),” its priority was placed below that of great power diplomacy.⁴⁹

Seen in this light, the Xi Jinping administration's Global South

47) Uno, *Chugoku to kokusai kankei*, 307-318.

48) Daniel Large, *China and Africa: The New Era* (Oxford: Polity, 2021).

49) Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*, 56-58.

diplomacy can be understood as something of a return to earlier roots. Along the axis of U.S.-China rivalry and confrontation, there exists an intermediate zone that adheres fully to neither side and adopts a neutral stance. Contemporary Chinese commentators sometimes refer to this as the “new-type intermediate zone.” Amid intensifying U.S.-China competition, the “new-type intermediate zone” is regarded not as a mere buffer but as the principal battleground where each side’s conceptions collide and compete for influence.⁵⁰ Which side wins the support of the Global South and draws it into its own supply chains and frameworks of international cooperation, the argument runs, will carry political-economic significance decisive for the outcome of the competition.⁵¹

(2) As a Strategy Toward the United States

Amid the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China, what character does China’s Global South diplomacy take on as a strategy directed at the United States?

Although elements of hard balancing, such as the buildup of military power and deepening ties with Russia and others, have grown in China’s strategy toward the United States, that strategy does not rely entirely on these elements. China is deepening its ties with Russia, but the two countries do not stand in a formal alliance; and while military modernization is proceeding rapidly, it will still be some time before China can stand on a par with the United States.

Instead, through partnership diplomacy with Global South countries and through the expansion of BRICS and the SCO, China is building, outside the U.S.-led international political-economic order, a parallel framework of cooperation in which it holds the initiative. By offering Global South countries alternatives to U.S.-led institutions and by speaking on their behalf, these arrangements serve to erode the legitimacy of the existing order from within.⁵²

As Rush Doshi has argued, China’s grand strategy has moved from a

50) “Zhong-Mei ‘yidai yilu’ jingzheng beihou de ‘zhongjian didai’ jiaoli” [The “Intermediate Zone” Contest Behind the U.S.-China “Belt and Road” Competition], *China Daily* (Chinese), September 25, 2024.

51) “Bainian da bianju xia de ‘quanqiu nanfang’” [The “Global South” Amid the Great Changes of a Century], *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 6 (December 2024): 2-26.

52) T. V. Paul, Kai He, and Anders Wivel, “Soft Balancing in the Regions: Causes, Characteristics and Consequences,” *International Affairs* 101, no. 1 (January 2025): 3-15.

phase of “blunting” U.S. power to a phase of “building” an order under its own leadership.⁵³ Global South diplomacy is a core instrument of this “building” phase. It is not merely a reactive countermeasure to the U.S. threat, but a positive foundation for actively constructing a new international order that more fully reflects Chinese values and interests. By drawing Global South countries in economically and deepening political alignment with them, China is consolidating its international base of support and cultivating a favorable strategic environment in which to challenge U.S. hegemony. China's Global South diplomacy can accordingly be situated as a long-term, comprehensive “hegemony-erosion” strategy. Rather than confronting U.S. hegemony with direct military force, it seeks to wear away over time the alliances and international legitimacy on which that hegemony rests, and to shift toward a new order with China at its center.

In this sense, the strategy toward the United States lies at the heart of China's foreign strategy, and Global South diplomacy can be understood as a policy that, through softer means, contributes to that broader strategy toward the United States. China's alignment behavior, therefore, cannot easily be described as having pluralized. Nor, for China, has there been pluralization of issues.

(3) Bloc Formation and Pluralization

What, then, is the impact of China's Global South diplomacy on international relations? The “Global South” is in reality a heterogeneous grouping of emerging and developing countries, and it is impossible to identify a single response to China's initiatives across this set. Discussing the impact on individual states and the diplomacy of each lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

What is possible here is to identify meaningful patterns from recent multilateral diplomacy. In this regard, the SCO Plus Summit and the military parade marking the 80th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, both held in September 2025, offer one telling case. The SCO Plus Summit was held in Tianjin on August 31 and September 1, 2025. This was followed on September 3 by the military parade in Beijing commemorating the 80th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Because the two events were held back-to-back, many leaders who attended the SCO Plus Summit

53) Doshi, *Long Game*.

also took part in the military parade.

As shown in Figure 3, comparison of the 2025 SCO Plus Summit and the 80th anniversary parade with the 70th anniversary parade in 2015 makes the following points clear.⁵⁴

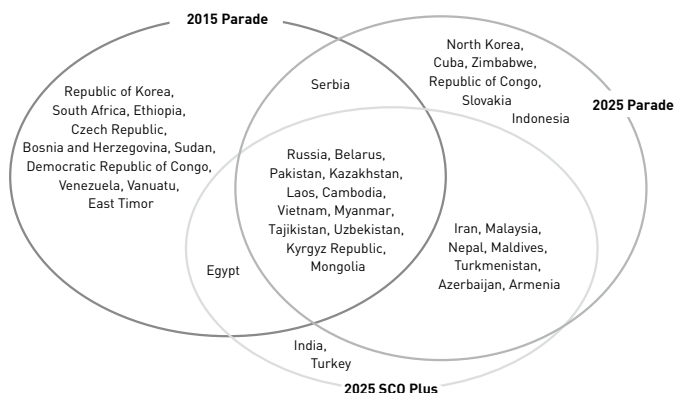
First, a trend toward bloc formation is clearly visible. The 2025 events vividly reflected the deepening of great power rivalry. In contrast to 2015, when China showcased broad international friendship, the 2025 parade was centered on quasi-allies and like-minded states opposing the existing Western-led order. The presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin, North Korean General Secretary Kim Jong Un, and the leaders of Iran and Belarus strongly signals China's intent to make a non-Western coalition visible.

Second, the picture of China extending its influence with the SCO at the core stands out clearly. The consistent or newly added participation of Central Asian states and mainland Southeast Asian countries at both parades suggests that China is steadily expanding its influence across the Eurasian landmass through the Belt and Road Initiative and the SCO.

Third, however, some countries did not conform to that pattern. Egypt, Turkey, and India attended the SCO Plus Summit but were absent from the military parade. Such states profess and practice an autonomous diplomacy. As this suggests, the contemporary configuration of international relations exhibits a pluralistic structure: while great power rivalry centered on U.S.-China confrontation displays tendencies toward bloc formation, the periphery still affords room for regional powers to pursue autonomous diplomacy.

54) Yamaguchi Shinji, "Chugoku no sensho 80 shunen parado ga shimesu kokusai chitsujo no genzaichi: Shinka suru jin'ei tairitsu to tagenka suru sekai" [The State of the International Order Revealed by China's 80th Anniversary Victory Parade: Deepening Bloc Rivalry and a Pluralizing World], *NIDS Commentary*, September 12, 2025.

Figure 3. Attending Heads of State at the 2015 Military Parade, the 2025 SCO Plus Summit, and the 2025 Military Parade



(Source) Author's illustration based on data from various sources.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed China's intensifying Global South diplomacy under Xi Jinping from the perspective of foreign strategy in an age of great power competition. The analysis has made clear that this diplomacy is not a mere assemblage of discrete policies but a calculated, comprehensive strategy aimed at countering U.S. hegemony and reshaping the international order.

First, the chapter has argued that this strategy aims to erode U.S. hegemony through non-military means. Through the construction of alternative international institutions such as the expansion of BRICS and the SCO and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), through the exercise of economic influence via the Belt and Road Initiative, and through the deployment of a flexible partnership diplomacy that contrasts with U.S. military alliances, China is relativizing the U.S.-led international order from within and seeking to construct a parallel order with itself at the center. This represents the concrete practice of what Rush Doshi calls the "building" phase of China's grand strategy: a long-term strategy that erodes the foundations of U.S. hegemony over time.

In this sense, Chinese diplomacy continues to be organized around the relationship with the United States, and Global South diplomacy is positioned to serve that broader strategy. For this reason, Chinese diplomacy

itself has not pluralized.

Second, China's Global South diplomacy is, on the other hand, accelerating the broader trend of pluralization in international politics. China has established itself as a major actor in the Global South and has succeeded in offering many developing countries an important non-Western alternative.

At the same time, while China's ambitious approach has won a degree of support from Global South countries, it has also produced concerns and pushback over issues such as debt, the opacity of projects, and environmental impacts. The countries lumped together as the Global South are by no means monolithic; each has its own national interests and agency. Rather than siding with either the United States or China, many of them practice a shrewd diplomacy that seeks to maximize their own interests by maintaining relations with both. It will not be easy for China simply to peel these countries away from U.S. hegemony, let alone to integrate them into a Sino-centric order.

Contemporary international relations exhibit a composite character: a current of bloc formation organized around U.S.-China rivalry runs alongside a pluralization unfolding in the periphery, and this situation can be expected to continue for some time to come.



The Evolution of the Japan-U.S.-Australia- Philippines “Squad”

Reconsidering the Concept of Like-Minded Partners

ISHIHARA Yusuke

Chapter 3

Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines defense
ministers' meeting held in Singapore
(Photo: Kyodo News)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

This chapter examines the formation of the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines “Squad” over the past fifteen years. Such small-group, or minilateral, frameworks are often described as U.S.-led. This chapter demonstrates, however, that shifts in the policies and perceptions of Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, together with the interactions among them, have played a more crucial role in the Squad’s emergence and development than the minilateral literature acknowledges.

In the course of this analysis, the chapter reconsiders the concept of “like-minded countries” or “like-mindedness,” terms frequently invoked in discussions of minilateral frameworks without their definitions and content being explicitly explored. In reality, like-mindedness among Japan, the Philippines, and Australia was neither self-evident from the outset nor static, and there have been differences in perceptions and positions on various security issues among them. The chapter shows that one of the key factors behind the emergence and development of the Squad was the gradual process of the materialization of like-mindedness among these three countries, not just U.S. strategic calculus and policies, even as they still recognized differences in each other’s positions.

Introduction

The framework of security collaborations among Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines, commonly known as the “Squad,” has advanced markedly in recent years. A meeting of the four countries’ defense ministers was held in Singapore in May 2025. The joint statement outlined initiatives that included Japan’s transfer of air surveillance radars to the Philippines, the construction of an air-domain sensor network by the United States, and Australia’s investment in defense-related infrastructure. It also set out a policy of strengthening information-sharing and “joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance activities” among the four countries.¹ The significance of such cooperation was highlighted by the inclusion of language responding to not only expanding activities by China in the South China Sea, an area of particular concern to the Philippines, but more broadly “China’s destabilizing actions in the East China Sea and the South China Sea and any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion.” According to an analytical report by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, the air surveillance radars in question will support situational awareness not only in the South China Sea but also in airspace north of the Philippines facing the country’s northern sea, which connects to the East China Sea. This is consistent with the language in successive joint statements, which reference both the South China Sea and the East China Sea.² The Squad is in fact developing a “combined hub” to support “information-sharing,” and in recent years, Japan has increasingly emphasized the significance of cooperation with the Philippines, which faces the Bashi Channel.³

-
- 1) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “Joint Statement on the Meeting of Defense Ministers From Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States May 31, 2025 – Singapore,” May 31, 2025 <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2025/05/c94ae977ac3b4be604af03f98a9e579ec83fcc50.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 2) Takei Tomohisa, “3000 kairi no koku jokyo haaku: Firipin ni keikai kansei reda o kyoyo suru igi” [Air Situational Awareness Across 3,000 Nautical Miles: The Significance of Providing Air Surveillance Radars to the Philippines], *International Information Network Analysis IINA*, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, August 15, 2024 https://www.spf.org/iina/articles/tomohisa_takei_01.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 3) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2025*, 382-383.

The emergence and development of the Squad is an excellent case through which to analyze recent changes in the various forms of minilateralism (small-group cooperation typically among three to five countries) that Japan is a part of. The recent examples of such minilateralism include Japan-U.S.-Australia, Japan-U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan-U.S.-Philippines, and the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4; Japan, the ROK, Australia, and New Zealand) framework, which entails cooperation with European countries. Among these various frameworks, the Squad is giving concrete form to the linkage between two particular minilateral frameworks, i.e., the Japan-U.S.-Australia and Japan-U.S.-Philippines arrangements. Moreover, as discussed later, overlapping interfaces are appearing in the areas of cooperation of the Squad and the Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral framework. Similarly, interfaces are also emerging between the Squad and cooperation frameworks involving European and other Southeast Asian states. The Squad, which is the focus of this chapter's analysis, is thus useful for exploring the emergence of inter-minilateral linkages among various frameworks which no longer operate in isolation.

In the context of Japan's various initiatives, the literature often emphasizes that U.S. strategy is the main driving force.⁴ Given the scale of U.S. material strength, its bilateral treaty network, and its broader military presence, this understanding seems almost self-evident and does align with the record of U.S. initiatives, including efforts to improve Japan-ROK relations and promote Europe-Asia cooperation.

In contrast, there are regional experts who pay closer attention to the United States' Indo-Pacific allies' thinking and practices as variables behind

4) Lucas Myers, "The Squad and the Quad," Asia Dispatches, Wilson Center, May 14, 2024; Kai He, "Rethinking East Asian Peace: The Perils of Over-deterrence and Minilateralism," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 79, no. 2 (2025): 300.

the emergence and development of minilateralism.⁵ Such analyses include studies focused on the strategic shift Japan undertook under the first and second Abe administrations, studies that consider domestic politics and society in the ROK and the Philippines, and a growing body of literature on recent changes in Australia’s security strategy.⁶ These efforts help fill the analytical gaps left by perspectives that focus solely on U.S. leadership.

The aim of this chapter is to extend research grounded in the latter perspective, with a focus on Japan’s engagement with the Squad. As noted above, such studies analyze the evolving circumstances of individual U.S. allies and thereby empirically supplement accounts that emphasize U.S. leadership. The present chapter likewise analyzes such concrete developments, while also focusing on the evolution of concepts that are useful for analyzing U.S. allies’ changes and their consequences.

Specifically, the chapter reconsiders the concept of “like-minded countries” or “like-mindedness,” terms commonly used to characterize

5) See, for example, Takagi Yusuke, “Shinko-koku Firipin no gaiko: Tai-Bei kankei no kyoka, chiiki gaiko no shinka to kokusai shugi gaiko no tenkai” [The Diplomacy of the Philippines, an Emerging Power: The Strengthening of Relations with the United States, the Evolution of Regional Diplomacy, and the Development of Internationalist Diplomacy], *Kokusai Mondai* [International Affairs] 714 (August 2023): 6-16; “Tahomen de seido-ka no susumu Nichi-Firipin kyoryoku: Anpo dake de naku keizai, shakai kaiatsu bumon de mo chakujitsu na seika” [The Institutionalization of Japan-Philippines Cooperation across Multiple Fronts: Steady Progress Not Only in Security but in the Economic and Social Development Sectors], *Nippon.com*, January 23, 2024; Sakata Yasuyo, “Kankoku no Indo-Taiheiyo pibotto: ‘Indo-Taiheiyo 2.0’ ni okeru Nichi-Kan, Nichi-Bei-Kan no senryakuteki renkei” [The ROK’s Indo-Pacific Pivot: Strategic Coordination of Japan-ROK and Japan-U.S.-ROK in the “Indo-Pacific 2.0”], “Kankoku Kanren” Kenkyukai [Study Group on South Korea] FY2023-5, Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 31, 2024 <https://www.jiia.or.jp/jpn/report/2024/03/research-report/korea-fy2023-05.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); Michael Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan’s Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); Nishino Junya, “Seize the Opportunity to Improve Japan-South Korea Relations,” *AJISS-Commentary*, September 16, 2022; Shoji Tomotaka, “Nichi-Bei-Hi shuno kaigo no kaisai: Sangokukan anzen hosho kyoryoku no yukue” [The Japan-U.S.-Philippines Summit and the Future of Trilateral Security Cooperation], *NIDS Commentary*, April 16, 2024; Satake Tomohiko, “‘Indo-Taiheiyo 2.0’ no riso to genjitsu: Goshu no shiten” [The Ideal and Reality of “Indo-Pacific 2.0”: The Australian Perspective], *CFIEC Contribution Series*, March 28, 2024.

6) Ibid.

participants in minilateral frameworks.⁷ The subjects of this chapter, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, are self-identified democracies that participate in the U.S.-centered bilateral alliance network, the so-called “hub-and-spokes” system, and have shared security concerns regarding China. In these regards, characterizing them as “like-minded” would seem to pose no analytical problems. In reality, however, these so-called like-minded countries are not uniformly aligned on all important issues. Geographically distant from one another, they have distinct perspectives and historical experiences that determine which regions they prioritize for security. Given these differences, how the four countries could cooperate as like-minded partners was by no means self-evident at the outset. Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines linkages emerged as part of a long process spanning the end of the Cold War to the present. A look back at this process shows that it involved bridging differences in position and perception, while identifying feasible areas of cooperation, which resulted in the gradual materialization of mutual like-mindedness. Given the fluctuating nature of these interactions, like-mindedness can be conceptualized not as something fixed but as something dynamic that is explored, discovered, constructed and reconstructed through interaction. From such a social perspective, this chapter looks back on the various initiatives undertaken from the end of the Cold War to the present, paying particular attention to how changes in Japan, Australia, and the Philippines have shaped the development of the Squad.

Section 1 analyzes the evolution of the Japan-Philippines security relationship from the start of the second Abe administration onward, showing how the two countries, despite differing security perceptions regarding the East China Sea and the South China Sea, have steadily worked to identify points of convergence, i.e., like-mindedness. Section 2 analyzes the development of Japan-Australia security cooperation in the same period, examining how the South China Sea and the Philippines

7) Japan’s use of the concept of “like-minded countries” in the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific context can be observed from the early period of the second Abe administration. Diet records show that the foreign minister used this concept most frequently, but during that administration, the prime minister and the defense minister also began to use it. For the most comprehensive and up-to-date theoretical study of minilateralism, see Hanada Ryosuke, “Minilateralism: A New Page for Indo-Pacific IR Lexicon,” *Pacific Review*, September 2025, 1-26. For a cross-cutting analysis of trends in minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, see *Kokusai Anzenhoshō* [Journal of International Security] (Special Issue: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific) 53, no. 2 (September 2025).

emerged as important points of convergence for cooperation between two countries with differing geographic outlooks and historical experiences. Together, Sections 1 and 2 show how Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, despite their differences, have gradually broadened their cooperation as like-minded partners, which culminated in the realization of the Squad. Section 3 analyzes the four countries’ efforts to reach out to states beyond the Squad framework and shows how a measure of like-mindedness has been discovered with these states as well. It considers expanded coordination with France, the ROK, and other Southeast Asian countries as the illustrative examples of this on-going trend. The conclusion summarizes the analytical implications for this book’s broader theme of pluralization and offers points of consideration for reconsidering the concept of minilateralism and Japan’s minilateral strategy.

1. The Development of Japan-Philippines and Japan-U.S.-Philippines Cooperation

(1) The Aquino Administration: The Emergence of the Japan-Philippines Security Relationship

The years from 2011 to 2015, spanning the latter half of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government and the early part of the second Abe administration under a Liberal Democratic Party–Komeito coalition, marked a turning point in Japan’s policy toward the Philippines.⁸ This shift manifested clearly in two ways. First, under the Noda administration’s policy of “strategic” use of Official Development Assistance (ODA), Japan explored new capacity-building initiatives for the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG).⁹ After the launch of the second Abe administration, this eventually led to the 2013 decision to provide patrol vessels to the PCG through ODA. Under that program, Japan transferred ten 44-meter multi-role patrol vessels

8) Aoi Yoshie, “Nihon no shogaikoku ni tai suru kaijo hoshikko noryoku kochiku shien: Junshisen-tei oyobi Jieitai no sobihin to no kyoyo o chushin ni” [Japan’s Capacity-Building Support for Foreign Maritime Law-Enforcement: With a Focus on the Provision of Patrol Vessels and SDF Equipment], *Reference*, no. 831 (April 2020).

9) “Fipin ni junshisen kyoyo: Seifu, Chugoku o kensei” [Patrol Vessels to Be Provided to the Philippines: The Government Keeps China in Check], *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, March 22, 2012; Policy Speech by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to the 180th Session of the Diet, January 24, 2012, Database “World and Japan” <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/pm/20120124.SWE.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

(the Parola class) to the PCG between December 2013 and January 2018, with low-interest, long-term yen loans extended to support enhancements to the vessels' principal equipment.¹⁰ In parallel, Japan initiated and completed the installation of PCG communication facilities and radar sites along the South China Sea coast (2014–2018).¹¹

The provision of patrol vessels was an extension of various long-running Japanese initiatives to support the national strength of the Philippines, a maritime country.¹² For example, the development of a trunk highway known as the Philippine-Japan Friendship Highway was one of the major projects carried out using Japan's ODA to the Philippines, which began in the late 1960s. This project supported the development of transport infrastructure for the Philippines, as a maritime nation, not only connecting its land networks but also creating routes leading to ports and coastal areas.¹³ Japan also provided direct support for port development, supporting the construction of berthing facilities and a terminal at Batangas Port, the second principal port after Manila. Furthermore, when the PCG was reorganized in 1998 as a separate administrative organization from the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Japan began conducting field surveys and, since 2002, has supported the PCG's capacity-building.¹⁴ This support has included direct human resource development for law enforcement and ship operations and the development of training programs (the Philippine Coast Guard Human Resource Development Project), as well as the development of coastal radio

10) Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), "Jigyo jizen hyokahyo: Firipin engan keibitai kaijo anzen taio noryoku kyoka jigyo" [Ex-ante Project Evaluation: Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard], 2013 https://www2.jica.go.jp/ja/evaluation/pdf/2013_PH-P257_1_s.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

11) "Engan keibi tushin shisutemu kyoka keikaku" [The Project for Enhancement of Coastal Communications Systems], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/1361010/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

12) Yusuke Takagi, "Philippine-Japan Maritime Cooperation in the Quest for a Rules-based International Order," in *Philippines-Japan Relations in the Twenty-First Century: Change and Direction*, ed. Dennis D. Trinidad and Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua (London: Routledge, 2025), 67-74.

13) The Philippines-Japan Friendship Highway itself is, of course, a land infrastructure project, but it was developed as part of the Pan-Philippine Highway, which connects the ports and coastal areas to the inland regions of the Philippines, a maritime nation composed of numerous islands, and links the country's main islands by crossing several straits. Subsequently, Japan has also implemented development assistance contributing to the enhancement of the Philippines' maritime transport routes.

14) "Engan keibitai o kyoka shite tomo ni anzen na umi o tsukuru (Firipin)" [Strengthening the Coast Guard and Building a Safer Sea Together (Philippines)], *JICA Magazine*, June 2023 https://jicamagazine.jica.go.jp/article/?id=202306_8f.

facilities, lighthouses, and the provision of buoy tender vessels (the Maritime Safety Improvement Project).¹⁵ The 2013 decision to provide patrol vessels can be viewed as a further expansion of this multifaceted, long-standing support to the Philippines.

Japan’s long-running initiatives proceeded in parallel with U.S. support to the Philippines. In particular, following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States expanded its support to the Philippines as part of the global war on terror.¹⁶ One element was direct support for improving inspection capacities at Philippine ports. The United States has also provided training and advisory support to various Philippine government agencies, including the PCG, with a view to improving response capacity for oil spills and disasters. Such U.S. efforts grew markedly under the Aquino administration (2010–2016). In particular, the United States provided direct financial (USD 20 million) and technical support for the development and operation of the Philippines’ National Coast Watch System, which became operational in 2015.¹⁷ These initiatives advanced in parallel with U.S. support to the PCG through vessel maintenance assistance, training, and information-sharing, amounting to a comprehensive expansion of support for the Philippines as a maritime nation. In this sense, Japan and the United States are notable for having supported the Philippines from an early stage

-
- 15) “Kaijo hoan jinzai ikusei purojekuto” [Philippine Coast Guard Human Resource Development], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/0600798/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); “Kaijo anzen seibi jigyo (2)” [Maritime Safety Improvement Project-B], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/PH-P159/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 16) Yamamoto Nobuto, “Dai-ni sensen toshite no Tonan Ajia: Tai-tero senso no Tonan Ajia-ka” [Southeast Asia as the Second Front: The Southeast Asianization of the War on Terror], *Hogaku Kenkyu* [Journal of Law, Politics, and Sociology] 89, no. 3 (March 2016): 57-61; Fukuda Tamotsu, “Dai 10 sho: Tonan Ajia ni okeru Beikoku domei: Bei-Hi domei o chushin ni” [Chapter 10: U.S. Alliances in Southeast Asia: With a Focus on the U.S.-Philippines Alliance], *Amerika gaiko ni totte no domei* [Alliances in U.S. foreign policy], 2010 https://www2.jia.or.jp/pdf/resarch/h22_nichibei_kankei/12_Chapter1-10.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).
 - 17) “US Ambassador Helps Open National Coast Watch Center to Enhance Philippine Maritime Domain Awareness,” News, U.S. INDOPACOM, April 30, 2015 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/Article/587080/us-ambassador-helps-open-national-coast-watch-center-to-enhance-philippine-mari/> (accessed on January 31, 2026); “U.S. and Philippines: Building Partner Capacity for Maritime Domain Awareness,” News, U.S. INDOPACOM, June 9, 2015 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/article/599922/us-and-philippines-building-partner-capacity-for-maritime-domain-awareness/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

through concrete bilateral cooperation including funding and capability-building, and each country's contributions complemented the other's. While high-level frameworks such as Japan-U.S.-Philippines summit or ministerial meetings had not yet been launched in this period, a close examination of the substance of cooperation suggests that de facto Japan-U.S.-Philippines trilateral cooperation was beginning to take shape.

The second shift was in Japan's narrative regarding the meaning and purpose of its support for the Philippines. As articulated in the so-called "Fukuda Doctrine" of 1977, Japan's support for Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, had originally focused on enhancing the region's "resilience."¹⁸ "Resilience" represented the Southeast Asian aspiration to achieve comprehensive national development, covering not only military but also economic and social dimensions, and to promote such efforts regionwide so as to promote their autonomy and not be powerlessly beholden to the vagaries of great-power politics.¹⁹ The idea that the promotion of a country's internal social and economic strength contributes to the stability of individual countries and, by extension, the region as a whole (and vice versa) resonated with Japan's "comprehensive security" approach, at the time, of seeking to contribute to regional and global security through economic instruments, particularly ODA.²⁰ In the post-Cold War era, this framework evolved into more concrete recognition of "transboundary" security challenges across Southeast Asia. In the case of the Philippines, emphasis was placed on counter-piracy and on ensuring the safety of maritime transport in the face of natural disasters (later termed "non-traditional security challenges").

In contrast, the new narrative that emerged in the latter half of the DPJ government, particularly under the Noda administration, was far broader in scope and no longer fit within the conceptual confinements of comprehensive security or non-traditional security. Against the backdrop of rising tensions in waters around the Japanese archipelago at the time, Japan sought to cast the situations in the East China Sea and the South China Sea as representing common challenges to maritime rules and universal principles. Japan used various concepts to emphasize this linkage and criticized China's "assertive"

18) Ishihara Yusuke, "Japan and the Origin of ASEAN Centrality," *Journal of Law, Politics, and Sociology* 94, no. 2 (February 2021): 471-496.

19) Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia: Domestic Priorities Define National Security," in *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 488.

20) Akaha Tsuneco, "Japan's Comprehensive Security Policy: A New East Asian Environment," *Asian Survey* 31, no. 4 (April 1991): 324-340.

and “unilateral” actions from the perspectives of maritime routes as “public goods” and “freedom of navigation.”²¹ The second Abe administration took what had been, under the Noda administration, a loosely composed narrative of various overlapping expressions and codified it into formal principles of maritime security. In particular, through the three principles of maritime security articulated in Prime Minister Abe’s 2014 keynote address at the IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue), Tokyo’s coherent messaging was established, opposing “unilateral changes to the status quo by force” and calling for the rule of law and peaceful resolution of disputes.²² This narrative emphasized that the maritime challenges Japan faced were part of a more universal problem affecting the region as a whole. In this context, the significance of tensions in the South China Sea and the importance of strengthening relations with the Philippines were increasingly emphasized.

In this period, Japan worked with the Aquino administration to convey this new narrative jointly and to substantiate like-mindedness between Tokyo and Manila, experiencing both successes and limitations. On the one hand, in major joint Japan-Philippines documents during this period, it became routine for the two countries to issue joint statements that contained the universal principles stressed by Japan: “freedom of navigation,” “peaceful resolution of disputes,” and opposition to “unilateral attempts to change the status quo.”²³ In this context, security in the South China Sea was emphasized as an issue of importance for the peace and stability of the wider region and the world.

On the other hand, opportunities for the two countries to jointly refer to maritime issues beyond the South China Sea were lacking, and to the author’s knowledge, no joint document explicitly addressed the East China Sea, an area of particular importance to Japan. The closest such document is a joint declaration on a Strategic Partnership issued by Prime Minister

21) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Speech by Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba at the Japan National Press Club, “Japan’s Prosperity Depends on its Ties to the Asia-Pacific,” December 14, 2011. The expression “assertiveness” appears, for example, in [Japan] Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2012*, Part I, Chapter 1, Section 3.

22) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Keynote Address by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo at the 13th IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue), “Peace and prosperity in Asia, forevermore: Japan for the rule of law, Asia for the rule of law, And the rule of law for all of us,” May 30, 2014 https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page18e_000087.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

23) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-Philippines Summit Meeting,” July 27, 2013.

Abe and President Aquino in 2015.²⁴ That declaration emphasized only the South China Sea as a specific area of importance for maritime security, while also referring to the broader G7 Foreign Ministers' Declaration on Maritime Security (2015). The G7 declaration explicitly mentioned both the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and included references to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, peaceful management or settlement of disputes, and opposition to threats and unilateral actions seeking to "change the status quo," covering nearly all the elements of the narrative Japan was communicating internationally at the time.²⁵ It is not impossible to interpret the Japan-Philippines joint declaration's reference to the G7 declaration as an indirect mention of the East China Sea, an area of importance to Japan. Yet, strictly within a paragraph that mainly addresses the South China Sea, the Japan-Philippines joint declaration only confirmed the Philippines' support for the "relevant views" expressed in the G7 declaration. It would therefore be analytically problematic to argue as if the Philippines had begun to make concrete statements, at this stage, on maritime security elsewhere in the region, including the East China Sea. This Philippine stance was consistent with that shown by the Aquino administration's response to China's establishment of a so-called "East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone," whereby Manila focused on expressing concern about the possibility that similar measures might be taken in the future, while primarily referencing the South China Sea, but not anything beyond this particular maritime subregion.²⁶ In this way, Japan's efforts to enhance like-mindedness with the Philippines through a universal narrative of maritime security had clearly encountered limits at this stage.

(2) The Duterte and Marcos Administrations: The Institutionalization of Japan-U.S.-Philippines Relations

The Philippines' focus on the South China Sea gradually began to shift under the Duterte administration (2016–2022), which succeeded the Aquino administration. In March 2017, China conducted maritime survey activities around Benham Rise, an undersea feature off the northeast coast of Luzon,

24) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan-Philippines Joint Declaration: A Strengthened Strategic Partnership for Advancing the Shared Principles and Goals of Peace, Security, and Growth in the Region and Beyond," Tokyo, June 4, 2015.

25) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "G7 Foreign Ministers' Declaration on Maritime Security," April 15, 2015.

26) "Philippines Fears China Wants West PH Sea Air Control," *Inquirer.net*, November 28, 2013.

and registered names for several geographic features. These developments fueled security concerns in the Philippines about not only the South China Sea but also its own surrounding waters.²⁷ In response, the Duterte administration deployed ground forces tasked with surveillance to Cagayan Province, which faces these waters, and decided to rename Benham Rise, located within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone, as “Philippine Rise.”

The Duterte administration subsequently asserted its commitment to defending sovereignty and rights in the Bashi Channel, the strait between Taiwan and Luzon. In 2019, President Duterte publicly stated that patrol activities would be strengthened so that the Batanes Islands would remain “ours.”²⁸ A multi-purpose shelter that the Northern Luzon Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines had been constructing on Mavulis Island in the Bashi Channel since the previous year was completed in 2019, and was described as a facility intended for use not only by fishermen but also by the military when necessary. Lieutenant General Emmanuel Salamat, commander of the Northern Luzon Command, publicly stated, “We have the Mavulis island, which we project to have Marines as well... [That will] manifest our strong claims in the partner islands in the northern frontier.”²⁹ Furthermore, when Chinese naval and air activities, including in waters south of Taiwan, intensified to unprecedented levels in 2021, President Duterte expressly stated that the Philippines was “neutral” with regard to Taiwan, confirming that the country was paying close attention to the situation in and around the Taiwan Strait.

As the Philippines extended its security interests beyond the South China Sea to maritime and air domains to the north, Japan successfully turned these developments into opportunities to articulate joint international messages on these issues. Toward the end of the Duterte administration, other countries also began to express heightened interest in the situation in and around Taiwan. The earliest such case was the July 2020 AUSMIN (the U.S.-Australia 2+2 Ministerial Consultations), which emphasized Taiwan’s

27) Ito Yuko, “Shogaikoku no tai-Chu ninshiki no doko to kokusai chitsujo no susei (4): Hi-Bei anzen hoshō kankei to Minamishinakai ryōyūken mondai o meguru Firipin no tai-Chu seisaku” [Trends in Foreign Perceptions of China and the Trajectory of International Order (4): Philippine Policy toward China in Relation to U.S.-Philippines Security Relations and the South China Sea Sovereignty Dispute], *China Report* 15 (March 30, 2018) <https://www.jiaa.or.jp/column/ChinaReport15.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

28) “Two PCG Vessels Set Sail to Batanes for Relief Mission and Maritime Patrol,” News, Philippine Coast Guard, August 1, 2019.

29) Marly Rome Bondoc, “Military to Build Fishermen’s Shelter in PHL’s Northernmost Island,” *GMA News Online*, February 16, 2018.

“important role” and stressed the “peaceful” resolution of “cross-Strait differences.”³⁰ The joint statements issued at the Japan-U.S. summit in April 2021 and the U.S.-ROK summit in May 2021 likewise emphasized the importance of “peace and stability” across the Taiwan Strait.³¹

Meanwhile, U.S.-Philippines relations remained unstable throughout the Duterte period, with tensions over human rights issues coming to a head. As a result, the Philippines was unable to use its alliance framework with the United States to articulate its concerns about maritime and air domains to the north. Indeed, only one U.S.-Philippines summit was held during the Duterte administration, in 2017, and a 2+2 was never convened.³² In this context, at the inaugural Japan-Philippines 2+2 in 2022, Japan, which maintained relatively stable relations with the Philippines, succeeded in producing a joint statement that opposed “actions that may increase tensions” and supported a “rules-based approach” not only in the South China Sea but also in the East China Sea.³³ This was a landmark statement

30) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Joint Statement Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2020,” July 28, 2020 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/united-states-of-america/ausmin/joint-statement-ausmin-2020> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

31) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement: U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era,” April 16, 2021 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100177718.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026); [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “U.S.-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement,” May 21, 2021 https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5476/view.do?seq=319610 (accessed on January 31, 2026).

32) At the start of the Duterte administration, the Obama administration was reportedly critical of the human rights situation in the Philippines and of President Duterte’s stance on human rights issues. President Duterte responded by publicly disparaging President Obama, calling him a “son of a whore” and telling him to “go to hell,” and a U.S.-Philippines summit was canceled at the last minute. Subsequently, a Philippine senator who had criticized human rights problems associated with the anti-drug campaign Duterte conducted as mayor of Davao City was arrested. This led to growing criticism within the U.S. Congress of the human rights violations under the Duterte administration, and language denying U.S. entry to relevant Philippine officials was incorporated into the FY2020 Appropriations Act. The Duterte administration responded by denying visas to the U.S. senators who had criticized it and announcing the initiation of procedures to terminate the U.S.-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement, further destabilizing bilateral relations. Termination of the agreement was ultimately averted at the last minute, but U.S.-Philippines relations stagnated overall during the Duterte period. This was further reflected in the only partial implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement agreed under the Aquino administration, the absence of a U.S.-Philippines 2+2, and the holding of only one U.S.-Philippines summit, in 2017.

33) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “First Japan-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (“2+2”),” April 9, 2022 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100329868.pdf>.

that coaxed the Philippines, which had focused its messaging on the South China Sea, into shifting its stance. The statement confirmed that like-mindedness between Japan and the Philippines as security partners was advancing, despite their geographic differences.

Alongside these significant statements, Japan was steadily consolidating its position as an important partner for the Philippines in the security field. One pillar was the further expansion of capacity-building support for the PCG, specifically the Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard, Phase II (2016–2023). This project provided two multi-purpose vessels of approximately 97 meters in length, twice that of the patrol vessels supplied during the Aquino administration, through long-term, low-interest yen loans.³⁴ These are the largest patrol vessels in the PCG fleet, expected to deliver an annual increase of 1,200 hours of operations and 24 patrols. As of the time of writing, they have already participated in patrol activities and joint exercises with Japan, contributing directly to enhancing the Philippines’ capabilities as a maritime nation. In addition, during the Duterte period, Japan agreed to launch an ODA project to develop a PCG facility at Subic Bay (April 2022), which would support the construction of an operations headquarters building, maintenance and repair facilities, and roads at Subic Bay as an additional key base complementing the increasingly congested Manila Port.³⁵ Some of the patrol vessels Japan has provided are slated to be based at Subic Bay, and “synergies” across multiple projects emerged by design.

In parallel, cooperation between Japan’s Ministry of Defense and the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines expanded. During the Aquino administration, relations between the two countries’ defense authorities were limited to goodwill visits and exchanges, with the exception of a single bilateral maritime exercise in 2015. During the Duterte period, meanwhile, cooperation expanded to include joint exercises. After previously participating only as observers, the SDF formally took part in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise in 2017 and 2018, and the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade joined the Kamandag exercise

34) “Firipin engan keibitai kaijo anzen taio noryoku kyoka jigyo (fezu II)” [Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard (Phase II)], ODA Mieruka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/PH-P263/index.html>.

35) “Anken gaiyoshō: Firipin engan keibitai Subikku-wan chiiki kyoten seibi keikaku” [Project summary: Philippines Coast Guard Support Facility Development Project in Subic Bay Area], JICA, April 26, 2022.

in 2018 and 2019.³⁶ In 2021, the first bilateral exercise between the Japan Air SDF (ASDF) and the Philippine Air Force was held at Clark Air Base, involving ground-based disaster relief training using both countries' C-130 transport aircraft. Besides joint training and exercises, the transfer of defense equipment also expanded. From 2017, Japan transferred a total of five Maritime SDF (MSDF) TC-90 training aircraft (with training opportunities provided at MSDF bases), and donated spare parts and equipment for the Ground Self-Defense Force's (GSDF's) UH-1H. In 2020, Japan decided on the transfer of four air surveillance radars to the Philippine Air Force.³⁷ The radar transfer also drew attention as Japan's first overseas transfer of a finished defense product. In this way, well before the institutionalization of Japan-U.S.-Philippines relations discussed below, both *de facto* trilateral cooperation and like-mindedness had grown in scope.

It was against this backdrop of advancing Japan-Philippines relations and Japan-U.S.-Philippines cooperation that the Marcos administration (2022–present at the time of writing) took office. The Marcos administration moved to strengthen the alliance with the United States. It agreed to expand U.S. military access to bases in the Philippines, including those facing the East China Sea, and developed new U.S.-Philippines bilateral defense guidelines that confirmed that the South China Sea fell within the scope

36) At the 2017 Balikatan exercise, ASDF personnel participated in a multilateral coordination cell on disaster relief, and as part of capacity-building support, personnel of the Joint Staff Office's Chief Logistics Officer and GSDF personnel participated in medical-related programs. See the announcement made by the Joint Staff Office on social media on May 22, 2017 <https://www.facebook.com/jointstaffpa/> (accessed on January 31, 2026) and [Japan] Ministry of Defense and SDF, "Eisei Balikatan 2017" [Medical Program of Balikatan 2017], May 1, 2017. On Kamandag, see [Japan] Ministry of Defense and GSDF, "Heisei 30-nendo Bei-Hi kyodo kunren (Kamandag 18) e no sanko ni tsuite" [Participation in U.S.-Philippines Joint Exercise (Kamandag 18) for FY2018], September 10, 2018; [Japan] GSDF, "Reiwa gan-nendo Bei-Hi kyodo kunren (Kamandag 19)" [U.S.-Philippines Joint Exercise (Kamandag 19) for the First Year of Reiwa], November 8, 2019 <https://www.mod.go.jp/gsdf/news/train/2019/20191108.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

37) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Kaijo Jieitai renshuiki TC-90 no Firipin e no iten ni tsuite" [Notice on the Transfer of MSDF Training Aircraft TC-90 to the Philippines], March 20, 2018; [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Rikujo Jieitai tayoto helikoputa UH-1H no buhin to no Firipin e no musho joto no kanryo ni tsuite" [Notice on the Completion of the Gratuitous Transfer of Parts and Equipment for GSDF UH-1H Multi-purpose Helicopters to the Philippines], September 30, 2019; [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Firipin e no keikai kansei reda no iten ni tsuite" [Notice on the Transfer of Air Surveillance Radars to the Philippines], November 2, 2023.

of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.³⁸ This shift was clearly informed by mounting concern over rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait. President Ferdinand Marcos has publicly addressed the safety of the Filipino diaspora in Taiwan and concerns that the Philippines itself could be drawn into harm in the event of a U.S.-China conflict. The advent of the Marcos administration thus revitalized U.S.-Philippines relations, which had been stagnating, and elevated like-mindedness among Japan, the United States, and the Philippines on maritime security spanning the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Following the Marcos administration’s inauguration, in June 2023, the three countries held the first meeting of national security advisers in Tokyo, and in April 2024, the first Japan-U.S.-Philippines summit was convened in Washington, D.C.³⁹ The outcome documents of these meetings reaffirmed the like-mindedness that Japan had cultivated with the Philippines over many years, in that they explicitly indicated that Japan-U.S.-Philippines cooperation now extends beyond the South China Sea to encompass the entire Indo-Pacific, including the East China Sea. The documents also enumerated a wide range of areas for cooperation involving not only maritime law-enforcement agencies but also defense authorities. The next section analyzes the process by which Australia eventually emerged as a key partner for this Japan-U.S.-Philippines framework, in the broader context of expanding Japan-Australia cooperation centered on Southeast Asia and the Philippines.

2. Japan-Australia Relations and the Philippines

(1) The History of Japan-Australia Cooperation in Southeast Asia

Throughout the history of Japan-Australia cooperation from the end of the Second World War to the present, Southeast Asia has consistently been the connective region in which the two countries have come together as partners. Geographically separated by the “tyranny of distance” and burdened with

38) Ueno Hideshi, “Minamishinakai no ima: Chugoku no iatsuteki kodo no jotai-ka to Firipin no taio o chushin ni” [The South China Sea Today: With a Focus on the Normalization of China’s Coercive Behavior and the Philippines’ Response], *Kaiyo Anzen Hoshō Joho Tokuhō* [Ocean Newsletter Special Report], June 2, 2025.

39) [Japan] Cabinet Secretariat, “Japan-United States-Philippines Trilateral National Security Advisors’ Joint Press Release,” June 16, 2023; [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States,” April 11, 2024.

many different conditions, the issues that Japan and Australia first addressed together in postwar Southeast Asia were primarily economic.⁴⁰ This was prompted by the restoration of Japanese independence under the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the country's economic return to Southeast Asia. At the time, many Southeast Asian countries and territories were part of the sterling area, with their currencies pegged to the British pound, and there was serious policy debate within Australia regarding the geopolitical and economic implications of an expanded Japanese presence there.⁴¹ Subsequently, as Japan underwent rapid economic growth, particularly from 1955 to 1972, and its economic network began to expand across the Asia-Pacific, it worked together with Australia to advance regional economic dialogue frameworks, including the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC), which would eventually lead to the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), involving Southeast Asian countries as key partners.⁴²

In contrast, the absence of cooperation in the security field, including the military domain, is unsurprising in light of the historical background of Japan's security policy. Japan limited its defense cooperation partners to the United States, its ally, and exercised extreme restraint regarding external military activity. Moreover, Japan's stance of not pursuing a regional security role aligned with Australian perceptions of Japan at the time. Throughout the Cold War, Australia harbored continuing suspicion of Japan, not only as a former wartime adversary but also as a country whose material strength was expanding at a staggering pace. To address uncertainties over Japan's economic rise, Australia adopted what came to be known as the "cap-in-the-bottle" thesis, holding that the U.S. military presence served to keep Tokyo in check.⁴³ From this standpoint, the fact that Japan-Australia cooperation in Southeast Asia was confined to the economic domain and conducted

40) Satake Tomohiko, *Nichi-Go no anzen hoshō kyōryōku: "Kōjōri no senshu" wo koete* [Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Beyond the "Tyranny of Distance"] (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 2022).

41) Matsui Hirokazu, "Osutoraria to Nihon, Tonan Ajia keizai kankei no saikakuritsu: Menjizu seiken no seiritsu kara 1954 nen 8 gatsu no tai Nichi seisaku kakugi kettei made o chushin ni" [The Re-establishment of Australia's Economic Relations with Japan and Southeast Asia: From the Formation of the Menzies Government to the August 1954 Cabinet Decision on Policy toward Japan], paper presented at the Southeast Asia Section, Annual Convention of the Japan Association of International Relations, October 19, 2025.

42) Oba Mie, *Ajia Taiheiyō chūiki keisei eno dotei: Kyōkai kokka Nichi-Go no aidentiti mosaku to chūiki shugi* [The Invention of the Asia Pacific Region: A History of Regionalism and Search for Identity by Japan and Australia as Liminal Nations] (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 2004).

43) Author's interviews with Australian government officials.

with virtually no military instruments was an acceptable arrangement for Australia. Surveying the public statements of many Japanese leaders of this period, it is evident that they were clearly aware of this regional view akin to the “cap-in-the-bottle” thesis.⁴⁴ In sum, the fact that Japan-Australia cooperation in Southeast Asia developed without like-mindedness as potential partners in the security domain was rooted in the two countries’ perceptions of each other.

In contrast to these constraints on Japan, throughout the Cold War, Australia consistently engaged in military activities in the region. Early in the Cold War, in the face of the threat of communist advance, this policy took the form of a Forward Defence strategy, with Australia fighting alongside the United States and the United Kingdom on the Malay Peninsula and in Indochina.⁴⁵ While the front line of this strategy was on land, the maritime domain, and in particular the South China Sea, which is the focus of this section’s analysis, was also a key area of Australian military engagement. During the early Cold War, naval exercises under the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), of which Australia was a member, were continuously conducted in the South China Sea, including in waters near the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines, and Royal Australian Navy surface ships participated regularly.⁴⁶

Following the U.S.-China rapprochement and the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, which served as significant turning points, SEATO was dissolved in 1977, and Asia-Pacific security underwent transformation. Even so, Australia’s engagement in the South China Sea continued. During this period, Australia was shifting from a Forward Defence strategy of expeditionary operations alongside the United States and the United Kingdom to a strategy focused on the Defence of Australia itself, while it maintained peacetime regional operations including intelligence activities in the South China Sea. The Royal Australian Navy’s Oberon-class submarine force collected intelligence in the South China Sea, including imagery and signals intelligence relating

44) Ishihara Yusuke, “Futatsu no Nikuson shokku to ‘sengo bagen’: Haken henyoki Nihon no sekinin” [The Two Nixon Shocks and the “Postwar Bargains”: Japan’s Responsibility in the Period of Hegemonic Transformation], *Kokusai Seiji: Guroobaru 70-nendai* [International Politics: The Global 1970s] 218 (March 2026): 64-79.

45) Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2017).

46) Edward J. Marolda, “Cold War Allies: Commonwealth and United States Naval Cooperation in Asian Waters,” *Canadian Military History* 23, nos. 3 and 4 (Summer and Autumn 2014): 230-231; “HMAS Melbourne (II),” Sea Power Centre Australia <https://seapower.navy.gov.au/history/units/hmas-melbourne-ii> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

to Soviet naval activities that became more active from 1979 onward at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.⁴⁷ Royal Australian Navy surface ships also began conducting naval exercises in the South China Sea from 1981, known as Starfish (later renamed Bersama Lima), under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), the framework through which the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand cooperate in the defense of Malaysia and Singapore.⁴⁸ Royal Australian Navy surface ship operations in the South China Sea continued to be supported by the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay, and joint exercises with the U.S. Navy and port calls in waters off the base continued during this period as well. Based on these experiences, from Australia's perspective, the Cold War can be described as a period of prolonged Japanese absence as a player in Southeast Asian geopolitics.

After the Cold War ended, Southeast Asia's functions, as the region connecting Japan and Australia, gradually expanded from its traditional economic focus to encompass cooperation in the field of non-traditional security. The existing literature has already analyzed the roles of Japan and Australia in peacekeeping operations in Cambodia and in dialogue and cooperation through the ASEAN Regional Forum; here, in line with the theme of this chapter, the discussion focuses on the Philippines and the South China Sea.⁴⁹ Australia's engagement with the Philippines after the Cold War expanded rapidly through the former's participation in the so-called "war on terror." Prime Minister John Howard, who happened to be visiting Washington, D.C. when the September 11 attacks occurred in 2001, witnessed the events firsthand and was deeply shaken by the experience. He became the first leader to invoke the U.S.-Australia ANZUS Treaty, and subsequently committed Australian forces to the invasion of, and counterinsurgency operations in, Afghanistan, as well as the invasion and postwar reconstruction of Iraq, becoming known as a prime minister who devoted himself to enhancing alliance cooperation.⁵⁰ That said, it would be overly simplistic to assess that Australia fought the war on terror solely out of

47) Geoffrey Cole, "The O-Boat Mystery Boats," Naval Officers Association of Australia website, August 11, 2009.

48) Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements: The Quiet Achiever," 1st Berlin Conference on Asian Security, September 14-15, 2006 https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/projekt_papiere/Thayer_ks.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

49) Ishihara Yusuke, "Chapter 6: Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region," in *Beyond the Hub and Spokes: Australia-Japan Security Cooperation*, eds. William Tow and Yoshizaki Tomonori (Tokyo: NIDS, 2014), 93-122.

50) John Howard, *Lazarus Rising: A Personal and Political Autobiography* (Sydney: Harper, 2010).

alliance considerations. Australia tackled the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia as a matter of direct national concern, especially after the 2002 Bali bombings, in which many Indonesians and even more Australians lost their lives.⁵¹ In this context, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) began lending military support to Philippine military counterterrorism operations through training and intelligence sharing, with a view to preventing the expansion of terrorist networks across Southeast Asia.⁵²

Australia’s support to the Philippines later extended into the law-enforcement domain, and there were instances in which Japan and Australia engaged in similar activities. In particular, Australia also supported Philippine maritime law-enforcement capabilities with the aim of preventing insurgents within the Philippines from working with foreign terrorist networks and using maritime transport routes to move people, supplies, and information. In December 2001, the two countries agreed on the provision of small patrol boats to the Philippine Coast Guard. From 2001 onward, Australia provided the Philippines with San Juan-class patrol vessels (56-meter class) and Ilocos Norte-class patrol boats (30-meter class), and subsequent training was conducted by Australian government personnel.⁵³ Before the South China Sea issue re-emerged, Australia was the only country other than Japan and the United States providing bilateral support for the PCG and Philippine maritime law-enforcement capabilities. At this stage, the foundation for what would later become the formalized Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines framework was arguably starting to take concrete shape. Indeed, the various documents on Japan-Australia and Japan-U.S.-Australia relations, which were institutionalized rapidly during this period, indicate that cooperation in Southeast Asia, centered on non-traditional security, was widely

51) [Australia] Department of Defence, “Bali Bombings 20th Anniversary: Resilience Meets Tragedy,” October 12, 2022 <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2022-10-12/bali-bombings-20th-anniversary-resilience-meets-tragedy> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

52) “Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of Australia on Co-Operation to Combat International Terrorism,” Supreme Court E-Library, March 4, 2003 <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/35/9941>; “Philippines Counter-Terrorism Assistance Initiative,” Transcripts from the Prime Ministers of Australia, July 14, 2003 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-20795> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

53) As far as can be confirmed, four vessels of each type appear to have been provided by 2006. See Australian Ship Builders Association, “Submission for the Senate Inquiry into the Scope and Opportunities for Naval Shipbuilding in Australia,” May 29, 2006 https://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/fadt_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004_07/shipping/submissions/sub36_pdf.ashx (accessed on January 31, 2026).

considered an important agenda item among officials in both Australia and Japan. The first Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue at the foreign-ministerial level, held in March 2006, issued a joint statement that referred to ASEAN as an important partner for the three countries and called for the promotion of cooperation in non-traditional security. Such language signaled rising like-mindedness in Japan-Australia and Japan-U.S.-Australia relations.⁵⁴

The like-mindedness between Japan and Australia, which developed after the Cold War and was centered on non-traditional security in the Philippines, remained limited to the non-military domain for some time. The reason can no longer be attributed to the Cold War-era “cap-in-the-bottle” thesis. According to Australia’s 2000 Defence White Paper, “Japan-U.S. relations” provided a “welcome framework” for Japan to assume a security role, and the document included positive language regarding cooperation with Japan, particularly in the non-traditional security field.⁵⁵ According to interviews conducted by the author, after the Cold War ended and as the postwar generation took on core positions in the Australian government, Australia adopted policies that more positively welcomed Japan’s role in international security.⁵⁶ While the Australian side harbored some uncertainties regarding the security strategy Japan would employ if the alliance were to dissolve, it also deemed that, precisely to avoid such a scenario, having Japan expand its security role and thereby strengthen the alliance would contribute to regional stability. A look at Australian circumstances at the time reveals that relations with China were beginning to cast a shadow over Australia’s regional policy, including its policy toward Japan. From 2009 onward, in light of incidents such as the harassment of the U.S. Navy’s USNS *Impeccable* by Chinese fishing vessels, pressure by Chinese maritime law-enforcement agencies on Southeast Asian fishing vessels, and Chinese resource extraction activities in disputed areas, Australia emphasized the importance of general principles such as freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea, while carefully avoiding direct criticism of China. The Gillard Labor government (2010–2013) institutionalized a Strategic Partnership with China, while publicly stating the position that Australia did not need to “choose between its longstanding Alliance with the United

54) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Australia-Japan-United States Joint Statement (Trilateral Strategic Dialogue),” March 18, 2006.

55) [Australia] *2000 Defence White Paper* <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/wpaper2000.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

56) Author’s interviews with Australian government officials.

States and its expanding relationship with China.”⁵⁷ At this time, Australia was beginning to confront the fact that the changes in Indo-Pacific security, including the destabilization of the South China Sea, were being driven by structural factors, namely the end of overwhelming U.S. preeminence and the expansion of Chinese power, but it was still at the stage of debating how to address these issues.

For Australia’s still-undefined posture toward China in this transitional period, Japan was a delicate issue. Bob Carr, who was Foreign Minister toward the end of the Gillard government, maintained a cautious stance regarding strengthening cooperation with Japan, given Japan’s ongoing frictions with China over maritime issues. Even Kevin Rudd, who served as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and was known for a more realist perspective on China-related security issues than Carr, suggested in his later memoir that he was wary of having Australia drawn into the “toxic” relationship between Japan and China.⁵⁸ These considerations did not bring about an overall stagnation in Japan-Australia relations, but they undoubtedly constrained efforts to give concrete form to bilateral cooperation on sensitive China-related issues, including maritime security. Consequently, like-mindedness between the Japanese and Australian defense authorities regarding the South China Sea and policy toward the Philippines did not advance much in this period.

(2) Developments in Japan-Australia Defense Cooperation Concerning the South China Sea and the Philippines

In 2012, however, the second Abe administration came to power in Japan, and in 2013, there was a change of government in Australia from Labor to the Coalition. Like-mindedness between Japan and Australia regarding the South China Sea and the Philippines began to expand gradually, including in the military domain. The Australian Coalition government (2013–2022) reinjected momentum into the foreign-minister-level Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, which had stagnated under the previous Labor government. The fifth joint statement issued in 2013 included, for

57) [Australia] *2013 Defence White Paper* https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/WP_2013_web.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

58) In his memoir, Rudd recounts that he decided not to participate in the Japan-U.S.-Australia-India framework then being proposed because of the need to insulate Australia’s policy toward China from the “toxicity” of Japan-China relations. Kevin Rudd, *The PM Years*, Kindle ed. (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2018), 1116–1117.

the first time (in the framework), language opposing “coercive or unilateral actions that could change the status quo in the East China Sea.” Similarly, it emphasized, for the first time, the importance of “peace and stability, respect for international law, unimpeded trade and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.”⁵⁹ This new posture toward Japan, adopted by the Coalition government, came to be gradually shared across Australian society as China-Australia relations faced various obstacles and rising tensions, leading to growing instability. As is well known, these problem areas were diverse, including Australia’s heightened concern regarding the security implications of the Belt and Road Initiative, the spread of suspicion and criticism within Australia regarding alleged Chinese influence operations in Australia’s democratic society, and friction between Australia and China over the 2020 call for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. The changes in the South China Sea situation analyzed in this section further accelerated changes in Australia’s policies toward China and Japan.⁶⁰

Reports as early as 2012 indicated that China was undertaking large-scale infrastructure expansion on Woody Island that could support military use. When a runway exceeding 2,000 meters and capable of supporting bomber operations was actually constructed in 2014, the Australian government hardened its critical stance over the reclamation activities.⁶¹ Subsequently, between 2015 and 2016, the further construction of a 3,000-meter-class runway on Fiery Cross Reef and its use for the deployment of aircraft including H-6K bombers confirmed that Chinese reclamation and infrastructure construction in the South China Sea had indeed come to serve as a foundation for military activities. The construction of runways and the deployment of bombers in the South China Sea theoretically brought the Australian mainland and its surroundings within the range of air-launched cruise missiles. From 2014 onward, Australian researchers, think tanks, and media produced analyses that sounded the alarm over

59) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Fifth Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement,” October 4, 2013.

60) Euan Graham, *Australia’s Security in China’s Shadow* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

61) Brendon Taylor, “Australia and Asia’s Maritime Disputes: Continuity amidst Chaos,” Special Forum, Asan Forum, February 22, 2016 <https://theasanforum.org/australia-and-asias-maritime-disputes-continuity-amidst-chaos/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

the situation.⁶² According to some insiders’ accounts, these private think-tank efforts captured, with reasonable accuracy, the strategic perceptions that ultimately informed the development of Australia’s National Defence Strategy, published in 2024.⁶³ That is to say, Australia’s criticism of the reclamation, infrastructure development, and militarization of features in the South China Sea was grounded not only in principles of international law and the stability of trade routes but also more direct concerns about the country’s own national security. In this context, Australia decided in 2014 to participate for the first time in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise, expanding its military engagement with the Philippines and the South China Sea.⁶⁴

As concerns regarding Chinese activities in the South China Sea intensified, Australia’s expectations of Japan gradually shifted. This transition is evident from a comparison of the 2013 Defence White Paper and the 2016 Defence White Paper, issued by the Labor and Coalition governments respectively. The 2013 White Paper, crafted by the Labor government, emphasized Japan as one of the regional powers whose influence “is becoming more important,” but the concrete examples it cited of “practical cooperation” were limited to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and to peacekeeping operations, that is, to non-traditional security. By contrast, the 2016 White Paper set out a more expanded policy of cooperation with Japan, “a major power in North Asia,” not only on non-

62) “Construction of an Airfield on the Disputed Spratly Islands Puts Australia in Reach of China’s Strategic Bombers,” news.com.au, November 24, 2014 <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/inventions/construction-of-an-airfield-on-the-disputed-spratly-islands-puts-australia-in-reach-of-chinas-strategic-bombers-reports/news-story/a5d4a77491052213a69d663bca755d15> (accessed on January 31, 2026); Malcolm Davis, “China’s Militarisation of the South China Sea and Australian Defence Policy,” The Strategist, November 11, 2015 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-militarisation-of-the-south-china-sea-and-australian-defence-policy/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

63) Based on various statements made by Professor Peter Dean, who was involved in the Defence Strategic Review that informed the National Defence Strategy 2024. See “Inside the Defence Strategic Review: A Conversation with Secretariat Co-lead, Professor Peter Dean,” The National Security Podcast, May 23, 2023; “Defence Strategic Review & Implications for the Maritime Domain; Delhi’s Role in the Indo-Pacific,” ASPI Podcast: Policy, Guns & Money, June 7, 2023; “US and Australian Defence, Policy, and Politics with Professor Peter J Dean,” Defence Connect Podcast, August 14, 2023; “Australia’s Evolving Defense Strategy,” Asia Chessboard, June 13, 2023.

64) “ADF Participate in Philippines Exercise,” *Australian Defence Magazine*, May 1, 2014.

traditional security but also on “maritime security.”⁶⁵ The white paper noted that the important trade routes between Australia and its major trading partners in North Asia, including Japan, accounted for “more than half” of Australia’s exports, and expressed expectations for cooperation with Japan in ensuring “secure and free-flowing” trade routes. Read together with the associated maps, the white paper leaves no doubt that the critical parts of these trade routes are through the South China Sea and the waters around the Philippines.

In this period, as Australia’s concerns about the South China Sea deepened, Japan was likewise strengthening its engagement on maritime issues in Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, both in its discourse and its actions. A representative and widely known example is the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), an idea originally proposed by Prime Minister Abe in his keynote speech at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 2016.⁶⁶ FOIP was a vision of broad prosperity and peace connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, emphasizing both infrastructure that enhances connectivity and maritime security. Strictly speaking, however, even before setting out the FOIP concept itself, the Abe administration had consistently set out a policy of advancing the rule of law and peaceful resolution of disputes in maritime domains, including the South China Sea, and pursuing security cooperation with various countries, through the five principles of Japan’s ASEAN diplomacy (2013) and the Shangri-La Dialogue keynote speech (2014) referred to above.⁶⁷ In line with this overall direction, in 2016, the same year FOIP was articulated, the Ministry of Defense and the SDF announced the Vientiane Vision, which set out Japan’s approach to defense cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and in 2019, issued an updated version, Vientiane Vision 2.0, emphasizing maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia, further promotion of the rule of law, and the advancement of various joint exercises

65) [Australia] *2016 Defence White Paper* <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

66) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI),” August 27, 2016.

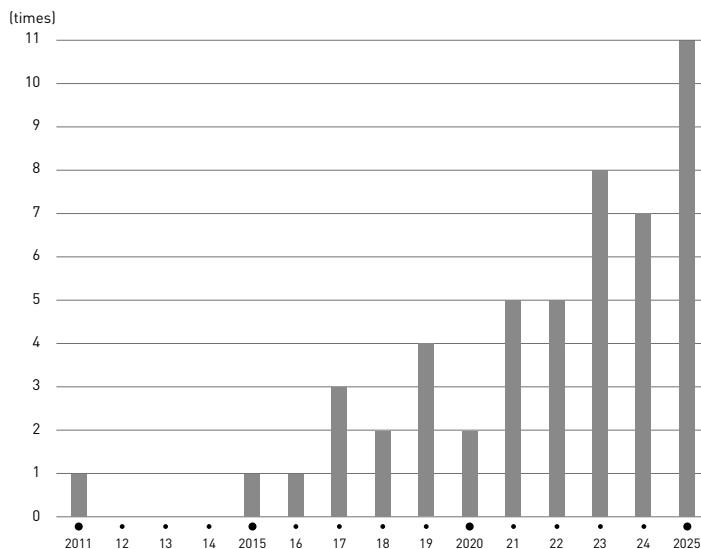
67) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy,” January 18, 2013; [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abe, “Peace and Prosperity in Asia Forevermore.”

and capacity-building support.⁶⁸

This rhetoric became concrete actions implemented by the Ministry of Defense and the SDF. 2015 was a particularly important turning point, with the SDF participating as observers in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise, Japanese and Philippine naval vessels conducting communications and tactical maneuvering training in waters off Manila in May, and the two countries’ maritime patrol aircraft conducting joint training in search and rescue and disaster relief in waters off Palawan Island, which faces the South China Sea, in June. These training activities were the first instances of Japan-Philippines defense cooperation. As Figure 1 shows, the SDF subsequently expanded its engagement with the Philippines through formal participation in the U.S.-Philippines Kamandag exercise and through maritime cooperative activities of various configurations including the four Squad countries. Not only did the frequency of training and visits increase, but their content also diversified, encompassing amphibious landing training, defense against weapons of mass destruction, and tactical maneuvering aimed at upholding freedom of navigation.

68) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “Vientiane Vision: Japan’s Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN,” https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/vientianevision/index.html (accessed on January 31, 2026); [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “Reference 57: Vientiane Vision 2.0,” *Defense of Japan 2023* (online) https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2023/DOJ2023_EN_Reference.pdf (accessed on January 31, 2026).

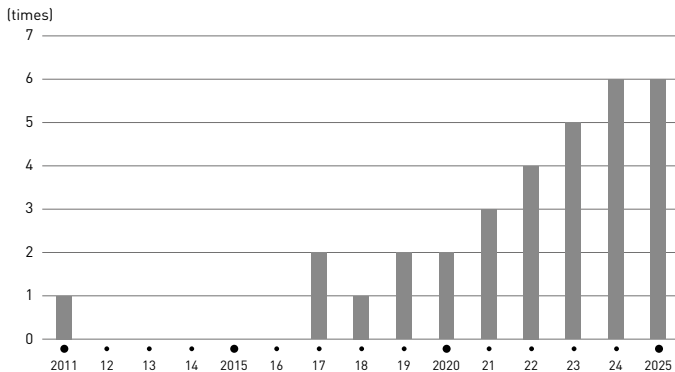
Figure 1. The SDF's Participation in Exercises in and around the Philippines⁶⁹



69) The exercises included in this graph (including observer participation) are as follows. 2011: Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Exercise (SCS); 2015: Japan-Philippines bilateral exercise; 2016: Balikatan; 2017: Balikatan, Kamandag 1, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Canada Joint Cruise Training (June 2017); 2018: Kamandag 2, Balikatan 2018; 2019: Japan-U.S.-France-Australia multilateral exercise, Sama Sama 2019, Balikatan, Kamandag 2019; 2020: Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Exercise, Japan-U.S.-Australia Joint Exercise; 2021: Japan-U.S. Exercise, Kamandag 6, LSGE21 (Japan-U.S.-Australia), Japan-U.S.-U.K.-Netherlands-Canada-New Zealand Joint Exercise, Malabar 2021 Phase 1; 2022: Japan-U.S.-Australia Trilateral Maritime Exercise, Sama Sama-Lumbas 2022, Balikatan 2022, Japan-U.S.-Canada (Noble Raven), Japan-U.S.-Australia-Canada Joint Exercise (Noble Smith); 2023: U.S.-Australia-Japan-Philippines Joint Exercise, Kamandag 7, Balikatan, Japan-U.S.-Canada (Noble Raven), Japan-U.S.-France (Noble Buffalo), Sama Sama 2023, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Canada-New Zealand (Noble Caribou) October 2023, Pacific Airlift Rally, Japan-U.S.-Canada-France (Noble Typhoon), U.S.-Philippines Salaknib; 2024: Japan-U.S.-Australia Joint Exercise, Sama Sama 2024, Balikatan 2024, Kamandag 24, Valiant Shield 2024, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines-New Zealand MCA, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Joint Exercise (April 2024); 2025: U.S.-Japan-Philippines MCA, Japan-Philippines MCA, U.S.-Australia-Philippines-Japan-Canada-France-New Zealand Exercise, Balikatan 2025, Kamandag 9, Sama Sama 2025, Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Joint Exercise, Japan-U.S.-France (Pacific Steller), Japan-Philippines (Doushin Bayanihan), Australia-Philippines Exercise Alon, U.S.-Philippines (Salaknib). The list of these exercises was compiled by the author to the extent ascertainable based on materials posted on the websites of the Ministry of Defense and the SDF.

The SDF’s participation in various exercises represented the deepening of like-mindedness between Japan and Australia in the Philippines. As shown in the graph below, the ADF, which was likewise increasing its training in and around the Philippines during the same period, was having more opportunities to participate in the same exercises as the SDF. Against this backdrop, Japan’s perceptions of Australia also shifted. Japan’s official explanation, which had initially emphasized “non-traditional security” as the central focus, was supplanted from 2021 onward by language framing Australia as a partner in a wider range of fields. This is consistent with the new Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation issued in 2022, which, unlike the earlier joint declaration that emphasized cooperation in non-traditional security, presented a broader vision of cooperation that included a commitment to consult in the event of “contingencies.”

Figure 2. Joint Exercises in and around the Philippines Involving Both the SDF and the ADF⁷⁰



This expansion of joint exercises suggests that the Philippines is becoming an increasingly important point of convergence between Japan and Australia, two countries pursuing strategies with very different geographic focuses. Australia’s 2024 National Defence Strategy presented a “Strategy of Denial” against the approach of hostile forces to the Australian continent

70) Among the exercises and training Japan participated in (shown in the previous graph), these are ones in which the ADF also participated.

and threats to its peace and prosperity.⁷¹ To achieve this objective, it set out a policy of acquiring the capability to impose high costs on adversaries as far away as possible in Australia's "immediate region," that is, the area extending from the eastern Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia to the South Pacific, including the Philippines.⁷² Thus, one of Australia's principal motivations in relation to the Philippines is preventing the potential southern advance of hostile forces toward Australia. Domestically, given the recent strengthening of Australia-Philippines relations and the existence of a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement between the two countries, the geographical location of the Philippines and the cooperation with Manila are of clear importance for Canberra's strategy of denial. Thus, Australia's engagement with the Philippines and Japan-Australia cooperation should be understood in the context of Australia's own defense concerns rooted in its position further to the south.

Japan's strategy is likewise centered on its own defense. The National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program, formulated in 2022, set out a policy of fundamentally strengthening defense capabilities and the country's overall defense posture within five years, on the principle that Japan itself bears "primary responsibility" to "disrupt and defeat" any invasion.⁷³ In this context, the importance of the sea lanes on which Japan depends was emphasized, and one of the regions specifically referenced was the South China Sea. In recent times, Japan's perception of the Philippines has emphasized the latter's location facing not only the South China Sea but also the Luzon Strait, by the East China Sea, which hints at the Philippines' growing geographic importance for Japan's own defense.⁷⁴ As the above discussion suggests, the South China Sea and the Philippines are the areas where Japan and Australia, each with its own geographic perspective and distinct strategy, effectively meet, one from the north and the other from the south. At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue,

71) Inoue Rintaro, "Osutoraria kokubo senryaku no koso to jittai: Nichi-Go boei kyoryoku no shinka ni mukete" [The vision and reality of Australia's National Defense Strategy: Toward Deepening Japan-Australia Defense Cooperation], *Chikei-gaku Kenkyu Repoto* [Goeconomics Research Report], no. 4 (June 2025).

72) [Australia] Department of Defence, *National Defence Strategy 2024* <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

73) These are also called the "three strategic documents" <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou.html>.

74) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2025*, was the first edition to expressly emphasize this point.

Defense Minister Nakatani Gen emphasized the importance of Japan and other countries striving “to generate synergy through enhanced cooperation and collaboration.” Japan-Australia cooperation involving the Philippines can be cited as an example of this.⁷⁵

In June 2023, the first-ever Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines defense ministers’ meeting was held, and the four countries subsequently conducted maritime cooperative activities, further formalizing the Squad. The proximate trigger was the inauguration of the Marcos administration in 2022, which placed the previously unstable U.S.-Philippines relations back on a positive trajectory. This was, however, not a sudden development. The trend toward strengthened relations and the underlying rationale had been gradually built up before 2022 as like-mindedness involving Japan, Australia, and the Philippines materialized with discernible substance. This is consistent with the rapid pace at which cooperation has been given concrete form since the framework’s formalization. As noted above, Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines are working to construct an information-sharing “hub,” and to that end, the four countries are discussing the development of information-protection agreements. In this context, Japan has begun the transfer of air surveillance radars to the Philippines and carrying out the relevant work, while Australia has implemented infrastructure investment in Philippine military-related facilities and concluded an Australia-Philippines cooperation agreement that anticipates the expansion of ADF activities in the Philippines.⁷⁶

3. Squad Plus?

(1) Cooperation with France and the ROK

As this chapter has shown, like-mindedness among Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines has begun to materialize and what

75) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, “DM Nakatani’s Speech at the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue (2025) 2nd Plenary Session: Ensuring Stability in a Competitive World 31st May 2025 <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2025/05/146ea433618bcfe264fda5b7c657207c37ac7008.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).”

76) [Australia] Department of Defence, “Joint Press Conference with Gilberto Teodoro Jr, Secretary of National Defense, Philippines,” Transcripts, Richard Marles, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, August 22, 2025 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2025-08-22/joint-press-conference-gilberto-teodoro-jr-secretary-national-defense-philippines> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

this entails, in terms of actual practice, has become clearer in recent years. These trends have encouraged the four countries to recognize one another as partners for cooperation in the context of regional security spanning the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and driven the Squad's development. Such networks of like-mindedness are by no means confined to the formal Squad framework and have a broader reach. This is embodied by the coordinated efforts by Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines to enhance various forms of cooperation with countries beyond the Squad. Such an expansion of like-mindedness can be characterized as taking two principal directions.

First, overlapping areas of cooperation and convergence in policy directions can be observed between other partners that have the will and capability to contribute to Philippine security and the four Squad countries, which amount to *de facto* cooperation. In other words, countries that do not formally participate in the Squad can nevertheless be regarded as like-minded partners associated, in a broad sense, with cooperation under the Squad framework. France is a leading example. France's policies and track record stand out particularly with respect to support for Philippine maritime law-enforcement capabilities. When President François Hollande visited the Philippines in 2015 as the first sitting French president to do so, the two countries issued a joint declaration on an Enhanced Partnership, which emphasized freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the importance of advancing maritime security.⁷⁷ Consistent with this, from 2018 onward, four FPB72-MarkII patrol boats (24-meter class) were delivered through French loans, and the Gabriela Silang offshore patrol vessel (84-meter class) was delivered in 2020, making France, along with Japan, another key provider of patrol vessels currently operated by the

77) [Philippines] Office of the President, "Philippines, France Agree to Enhance Bilateral Ties," February 27, 2015 https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/philippines-france-agree-to-enhance-bilateral-ties/ (accessed on January 31, 2026); for the text of the declaration, see [Philippines] Department of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Declaration on the Enhanced Partnership between the Republic of the Philippines and the French Republic" <https://dfa.gov.ph/index.php/newsroom/dfa-releases/5507-joint-declaration-on-the-enhanced-partnership-between-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the-french-republic> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

PCG.⁷⁸ In April 2025, France’s OCEA concluded a contract to build forty new patrol boats (35-meter class), adding to the country’s track record as a partner in upgrading the PCG’s capabilities.⁷⁹ In February 2025, the Charles de Gaulle Carrier Strike Group made a port call in the Philippines and conducted joint exercises in the South China Sea with the Philippine Navy as part of maritime cooperative activities.⁸⁰ Given these overlapping areas of cooperation and activity, France can be characterized as a like-minded country outside the Squad framework. France has continued to issue various joint documents that refer to cooperation with Japan and the United States across the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, after a period of stagnation in its cooperation with Australia following the September 2021 launch of AUKUS (when the Morrison government cancelled its conventional submarine construction program with France), France has restabilized cooperation with the current Albanese government, increasingly emphasizing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.⁸¹ As France’s activities in the Philippines demonstrate, its statements and policy directions for cooperation with Squad countries reflect a concrete like-mindedness backed by action, not merely rhetoric.

The ROK is another country that has been increasing its concrete cooperation in similar fields. In some areas, it is advancing even greater direct cooperation with Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines than France. Japan’s expectations regarding the ROK originally centered on broad cooperation that extended beyond the Korean Peninsula to address regional and global challenges. For example, the 2013 edition of the Diplomatic Bluebook, the first issued after the second Abe administration’s inauguration, characterized Japan and the ROK as “most important

78) “Philippine Coast Guard Commissions 2 Fast Patrol Boats from France,” *Asia Pacific Defense Journal*, January 18, 2019 <https://www.asiapacificdefensejournal.com/2019/01/philippine-coastguard-commissions-2.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); Xavier Vavasseur, “Philippine Coast Guard OPV BRP Gabriela Silang Arrived in Manila,” *Naval News*, August 4, 2020 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/04/philippine-coast-guard-opv-brp-gabriela-silang-arrived-in-manila/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

79) “40 x 35 m Fast Patrol Boats OCEA FPB 110 MKII for the Philippine Coast Guard,” *News*, OCEA, May 22, 2025 <https://www.ocea-ssm.com/40-x-35-m-fast-patrol-boats-ocea-fpb-110-mkii-for-the-philippine-coast-guard/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

80) Geoffrey Maitem, “French Aircraft Carrier in Historic First Visit to the Philippines,” *Naval News*, February 24, 2025 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/02/french-aircraft-carrier-in-historic-first-visit-to-the-philippines/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

81) Matthew Doran, “Australian Government Agrees to Pay \$835 Million to French Submarine Contractor Naval Group over Cancelled Contract,” *ABC News*, June 11, 2022 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-11/albanese-submarine-deal-with-france/101145042> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

neighboring countries, which share fundamental values and interests, such as democracy and market economy, and will work together on various regional and global challenges including North Korea, peacebuilding, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, climate change, and poverty.”⁸² As has been well documented, when Japan-ROK relations subsequently destabilized over questions such as the issue of civilian Korean workers under Japanese colonial rule and tensions between defense authorities, such a characterization was scaled back. Although both countries have since worked on these pending bilateral issues, the language regarding Japan-ROK relations from that earlier period has not been restored. Nevertheless, the most recent Diplomatic Bluebook 2025 maintains the language that “the ROK is an important neighboring country with which Japan should cooperate as partners in dealing with various issues of the international community” and that “in light of the current strategic environment, the importance of Japan-ROK relations remains unchanged.”⁸³

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration, inaugurated in 2022, pursued a foreign policy that aligned more closely with Japan’s broad expectations than previous administrations. As is well known, this resulted in the steady expansion of Japan-U.S.-ROK relations. The pillars of these strengthened relations, as articulated in the Camp David agreement documents of 2023, were a commitment to consult on challenges and provocations in the region, the real-time sharing of information on North Korean missiles, and the regular conduct of the multi-domain exercise Freedom Edge.⁸⁴ The Japan-U.S.-ROK joint statement issued at Camp David emphasized the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait in addition to challenges on the Korean Peninsula, referred to “dangerous” Chinese behavior in the South China Sea, and affirmed that the 2016 arbitral award should serve as the “legal basis” for

82) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Gaiko Seisho 2013* [Diplomatic Bluebook 2013] https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2013/html/chapter2/chapter2_01_01.html#h0201010201 (accessed on January 31, 2026).

83) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2025* <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2025/pdf/pdfs/2-2.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

84) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Commitment to Consult Among Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States.” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100541780.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026). As of the time of writing, basic information on the most recent Freedom Edge 3 can be found at [Japan] Joint Staff Office, “(Announcement) Japan-ROK-U.S. Exercise Freedom Edge 25,” September 5, 2025.

negotiations between the parties concerned.⁸⁵

The ROK’s stance of agreeing to language critical of China in relation to the South China Sea has been backed by concrete action and reflects the ROK’s evolving like-mindedness with the Squad countries. Its Navy has, since the 1990s, transferred used vessels to the Philippine Navy and, to date, has built and delivered ten new ships.⁸⁶ In 2024, when President Marcos and President Yoon issued a joint declaration on a Strategic Partnership, they agreed to strengthen cooperation in maritime law enforcement as one of its pillars. The two countries’ coast guards subsequently signed a memorandum of understanding on maritime cooperation, and the ROK is reportedly seeking opportunities to participate in the PCG’s new vessel acquisition program. The ROK’s proactiveness has also contributed to elevating the like-mindedness between itself and the Squad countries. The land exercise Kamandag 9, conducted in the Philippines from May to June 2025, included the participation of Japan, the United States, the ROK, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom, with activities including coastal maneuvering and amphibious operations.⁸⁷ While Australian operational units did not participate, many of the U.S. Marines who took part in the exercise were deployed from the Marine Rotational Force – Darwin hosted by Australia. Moreover, ADF staff participated in discussions held as part of the program, thereby making substantive contributions to the realization of the exercise.⁸⁸ Given the overlap in cooperation areas and a track record of actual coordination, it is unsurprising that a five-country defense ministers’ meeting of Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines plus the ROK was held in

85) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” August 18, 2023 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100541826.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

86) Chris Panella, “A Top South Korean Shipbuilder Is Arming the Philippines with a New Fleet of Warships Built for Tougher Pacific Fights,” *Business Insider*, December 12, 2025 <https://www.businessinsider.com/top-south-korean-shipbuilder-arming-philippines-with-new-frigates-2025-12> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

87) “Multinational Forces Set to Launch Kamandag 9 in the Philippines,” *News, U.S. INDOPACOM*, May 5, 2025 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4175053/multinational-forces-set-to-launch-kamandag-9-in-the-philippines/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

88) “U.S., Philippines, Japan and the Republic of Korea Conclude Kamandag 9,” *News, U.S. INDOPACOM*, June 6, 2025 <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4209035/us-philippines-japan-and-the-republic-of-korea-conclude-kamandag-9/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

November 2024.⁸⁹ It will be worth watching whether the Lee Jae-myung administration that took office in June 2025 continues such initiatives. In this regard, a telling piece of empirical evidence is the joint statement issued by the Japan-U.S.-ROK foreign ministers' meeting in September 2025, which emphasized peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and the importance of international law in the South China Sea.⁹⁰

(2) Outreach to Malaysia and Indonesia

The networks of like-mindedness extending beyond the Squad are not limited to states such as France and the ROK, which seek to expand their activities in and around the Philippines. As a second direction in the expansion of like-mindedness, an emerging de facto network of cooperation between the Squad and Southeast Asian countries with which the Philippines is itself strengthening relations can be observed. Illustrative examples are Malaysia and Indonesia. They have long engaged in cooperation on counterterrorism and combating transnational crime with the Philippines in the Celebes Sea, where they share maritime borders. Such cooperation was further strengthened after the 2017 terrorist incident in Marawi in the Philippines and formalized in 2018 as a Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement. Furthermore, based on the agreement reached at the 2022 trilateral defense ministers' meeting, the three countries are promoting cooperation among their maritime law-enforcement agencies and enhancing joint training and information-sharing.⁹¹ In practice, the navies and maritime law-enforcement agencies of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia coordinate joint training and patrol activities for law enforcement and the stable use of the tri-border area.

As noted above, Japan, Australia, and the United States have been extending capacity-building support for the maritime law-enforcement agencies of Malaysia and Indonesia, with which the Philippines is strengthening cooperation. In this sense, they are like-minded countries that

89) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Joint Readout from Australia-Japan-Philippines-Republic of Korea-United States Defense Ministers' Meeting," November 21, 2024 <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/images/5038b243cbc015b93db26d353181f80de8a27667.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

90) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement from the Trilateral Meeting of the United States of America, Japan, and the Republic of Korea in New York City," September 22, 2025 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100908422.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

91) Raymund Jose G. Quilop, "Trilateral Co-operation by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines: Temper Expectations," *Global Asia* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 90-94.

share a degree of common concern. (Indeed, Japan refers to countries that receive its support for security capacity-building as “like-minded countries,” and Malaysia and Indonesia are included on that list).⁹² Japan has long worked to enhance Indonesia’s maritime law-enforcement capabilities, beginning with grant aid in 2005 under the Project for Construction of Patrol Vessels for the Prevention of Piracy, Maritime Terrorism and Proliferation of Weapons, which included the provision of three patrol vessels in response to counterterrorism and counter-piracy concerns.⁹³ More recently, in 2023, Japan agreed to provide two fishery monitoring patrol vessels as grant aid to the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency, and in March 2024, it agreed to extend low-interest yen loans for the provision of an 85-meter-class large patrol vessel.⁹⁴ In January 2025, Japan agreed to provide two high-speed patrol boats to the Indonesian Navy under the Official Security Assistance (OSA) scheme.⁹⁵ Indonesia has multiple government agencies responsible for maritime law enforcement, and Japan has provided cross-cutting support to them, including the provision of surveillance cameras and gate management equipment from the 2000s onward, as well as capacity-building support across multiple domains, including arrest techniques, search and rescue, and maritime domain awareness, through joint training and seminars conducted by the Japan Coast Guard.

Alongside Japan’s efforts, the United States and Australia have likewise worked to strengthen Indonesia’s maritime law-enforcement capabilities. Since 2008, the United States has provided numerous high-speed patrol vessels and conducted training between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency. It has continued such capacity-building support, including agreeing in 2021 to provide financial support

92) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy Bureau, Security Cooperation Division, “Official Security Assistance” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100826252.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

93) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Grant Aid to Indonesia for the Project for Construction of Patrol Vessels for the Prevention of Piracy, Maritime Terrorism and Proliferation of Weapons,” June 16, 2006 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2006/6/0616-3.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

94) “Signing of Grant Agreement with Indonesia: Contributing to the Improvement of Maritime Safety and Security in the Territorial Waters of Indonesia through the Deployment of a Patrol Vessel,” News Release, JICA, March 25, 2024 https://www.jica.go.jp/english/information/press/2023/20240325_10.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

95) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Signing and Exchange of Notes for Official Security Assistance (OSA) FY2024 project to the Republic of Indonesia,” January 11, 2025 https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/pageite_000001_00753.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

for the establishment of a maritime training center on Batam Island.⁹⁶ The center opened in January 2024 and serves as a hub for various forms of training to equip personnel from the relevant Indonesian agencies with maritime law-enforcement capabilities. Australia shares a maritime border with Indonesia and there is a history of friction between the two countries over the handling of asylum seekers traveling by sea between them and through nearby waters. In recent years, however, the two countries have not allowed such individual issues to deteriorate their bilateral political relationship. In 2017, they issued a Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, and in the following year, they developed a corresponding action plan. Since then, they have conducted joint patrols in waters around the maritime border in the Timor Sea and in the Arafura Sea, built mutual trust, and enhanced Indonesia's capabilities through various seminars, tabletop exercises, and field exercises.⁹⁷

Similarly, Japan, the United States, and Australia have been moving in step on strengthening the maritime law-enforcement capabilities of Malaysia, with which the Philippines is also seeking closer cooperation. Even before Malaysia established the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) in 2005, Japan had been conducting joint training and joint patrol vessel and aircraft activities in waters around Malaysia. Following MMEA's establishment, Japan provided grant aid for the Project for Improvement of Equipment for Maritime Security Enhancement, which included the establishment of camera and radio detection control centers necessary for a maritime surveillance system. Subsequent grant aid has supported the construction of various facilities and the provision of equipment, as well as human resource development through the dispatch of Japanese practitioners.⁹⁸ In 2016, Japan agreed to donate two patrol vessels and to

96) "US, Indonesia Building Maritime Training Base on Batan," Radio Free Asia, June 28, 2021 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/base-06282021182525.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

97) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation," February 26, 2017 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-indonesia-joint-declaration-maritime-cooperation.pdf> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

98) "Kaijo keibi kyoka kizai seibi keikaku (1/2-ki)" [The Project for Improvement of Equipment for Maritime Security Enhancement (Phase 1/2)], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/0711100/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026); "Kaijo keibi kyoka kizai seibi keikaku (2/2-ki)" [The Project for Improvement of Equipment for Maritime Security Enhancement (Phase 2/2)], ODA Mieru-ka Site [ODA Visualization Site] (JICA) <https://www.jica.go.jp/oda/project/0802700/index.html> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

provide funding and technical cooperation to enhance the functions of the ASEAN Regional Training Center, an educational institution located in Malaysia, to strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries.⁹⁹

For its part, Australia agreed to donate two Bay-class patrol vessels (38-meter class) built by the Australian shipbuilder Austal in 2015. Since 2018, Australia and Malaysia’s maritime law-enforcement agencies have jointly conducted Operation Redback off Kuala Perlis and elsewhere, carrying out boarding inspections of vessels and apprehending those engaged in illegal activities.¹⁰⁰ The United States provides capacity-building support through joint training and seminars, and in May 2024, it was announced that the United States would transfer a large cutter to the MMEA to strengthen Malaysia’s high seas capabilities, with the delivery completed in September 2025 under the new Trump administration.¹⁰¹ In sum, Japan, the United States, and Australia have begun to take on a concrete like-mindedness in supporting cooperation between the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Squad, composed of the United States and three of its Indo-Pacific allies, and analyzed its formation process and forms of cooperation. In doing so, it has shown that even among partners commonly described as “like-minded,” differences in position on important issues exist, and these differences have shaped the form and process of cooperation in concrete ways. The chapter has further illuminated the process by which the four countries’

99) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Exchange of Notes for the Grant of Patrol Vessels and for the Grant Aid to Malaysia,” November 16, 2016 https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001355.html (accessed on January 31, 2026).

100) “Australian Vessel Gifted to Malaysia,” Media Release, [Australia] Department of Home Affairs, February 10, 2015 <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/peterdutton/Pages/2015/australian-vessel-gifted-malaysia.aspx> (accessed on January 31, 2026); “Australia and Malaysia Cooperation Combats Maritime Crime through Operation REDBACK,” [Australia] Australian Border Force, June 30, 2021 <https://www.abf.gov.au/newsroom-subsite/Pages/maritime-crime-operation-redback-30-06-2021.aspx> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

101) [U.S.] Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “The United States’ Commitment to Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific,” Fact Sheet, September 23, 2025 <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-commitment-to-maritime-security-in-the-indo-pacific/> (accessed on January 31, 2026).

perceptions and positions have shifted, materializing and clarifying their like-mindedness. In these contexts, like-minded countries or like-mindedness were by no means self-evident or fixed from the outset. They have fluctuated as the result of changes within, and interactions among, the relevant countries. This perspective on dynamic like-mindedness offers conceptual implications in the following three respects.

First, the analytical concept of minilateralism itself should be reconsidered. A broader survey of debates on the concept shows that minilateralism is often characterized as involving only issue-specific areas of cooperation and as being exclusive in that lines are drawn between participants and non-participants. The analysis of changing like-mindedness and the Squad process presented in this chapter, however, suggests the need to reexamine these two received notions. As like-mindedness becomes more concrete and clearer, areas of cooperation may broaden, and meaningful coordination and synergistic activities can be realized even with countries that do not formally participate in the framework. In this sense, minilateralism may not always become exclusive in nature.

Second, the Squad provides empirically rich material for examining this book's broader theme of "competitive pluralization." This chapter's analysis sheds light not only on U.S. leadership but also the role of Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, as well as the existence of cooperating countries beyond the Squad. It reveals the diverse facets of minilateralism, which is often explained solely in the context of U.S. strategy toward China. The Squad countries explore areas of cooperation among themselves and, having identified domains in which the Squad framework can support cooperation, exert actual influence in them. In this respect, to understand the patterns of cooperation and competition in the Indo-Pacific, it is essential to view competition in this region not solely through the lens of U.S.-China rivalry but to adopt a perspective of pluralization that takes into account the dynamics and distinctive influence of U.S. allies.

Third, Japan's long-running Squad-related initiatives addressed in this chapter exhibit a certain consistent character. As has been pointed out, the policy of developing security relations with the Philippines, Australia, and many other countries around the Squad is by no means a recent undertaking; it has followed a long-term trajectory and steadily accumulated results. Along this trajectory, a flexible and persistent Japanese posture can be seen: Japan has seized on changes in the geographic perceptions and security policies of partners such as the Philippines and Australia, used these as opportunities to strengthen relations, and gradually developed new areas of cooperation.

This differs from the image conveyed by the so-called “reactive state” model of postwar Japanese foreign policy, in which a domestically divided Japan merely reacts to external changes and leaves open a window of opportunity for other countries to intervene in its decision-making process. Rather, it can be interpreted as an indicator that some consistent and strategic thinking does exist on the part of Japan with its own agency in being alert to shifts in circumstances and turning them to its advantage. The analysis in this chapter shows that the results of such Japanese initiatives have been one of the important factors that have made possible the launch and development of the Squad.



The Republic of Korea: Finding Its Footing in the Indo-Pacific

ISHIDA Tomonori

Chapter 4

President Lee Jae-myung and President Xi Jinping
at the China-ROK Summit (November 2025)

(Photo: Yonhap News Agency/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

In recent years, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has deepened its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. This engagement reflects both the ROK's identity as a middle power and a regional policy paradigm distinctive to the country. The ROK's Indo-Pacific policy has continued to evolve within the strategic objective of maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and China. It is characterized by deliberately distancing the ROK from the power politics between these two great powers and by focusing on initiatives related to nontraditional security. This stance is consistent with the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity and with its longstanding regional policy paradigm. It is therefore not one that will be readily reversed.

Introduction

The ROK has, in recent years, deepened its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. In December 2022, the ROK unveiled its own regional policy concept: the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region. Subsequently, at the August 2023 Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral summit at Camp David, the three countries articulated the fundamental position that “as Indo-Pacific nations, Japan, the [ROK], and the United States will continue to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific based on a respect for international law, shared norms, and common values.”¹ Moreover, the ROK’s engagement has gradually taken on a military dimension as well. Since June 2024, the ROK has partnered with Japan and the United States to conduct Freedom Edge, an annual joint exercise aimed primarily at maintaining “peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula.” There are also indications that the ROK’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific is beginning to extend beyond the traditional Japan-U.S.-ROK trilateral framework. For example, in November 2024, when the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus was convened in Vientiane, the ROK joined a five-country defense ministers’ meeting that built on the so-called “Squad” framework comprising Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines. As an extension of this, for the first time, ROK marines, alongside the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, participated in disaster-relief training during the U.S.-Philippines marine exercise Kamandag 9 beginning in late May 2025.

The ROK’s strategic interaction in the Indo-Pacific region can be understood as part of the broader trend of competitive pluralization in the Indo-Pacific, which is this volume’s central theme. Furthermore, the shift in ROK regional policy, from a primary focus on the issue of North Korea to the broader question of the regional order in the Indo-Pacific, may also signal the pluralization of ROK foreign and security policy itself.

What, then, is the ROK’s Indo-Pacific policy? In a strategic environment defined by U.S.-China rivalry, how does the ROK engage others and seek to ensure its own security? What are the distinctive features of its approach when compared with those of other regional states? This chapter addresses these questions, while outlining the historical context of ROK foreign and security policy. As the abovementioned developments suggest, the ROK’s Indo-Pacific policy has much in common with the policies of other regional

1) [U.S.] White House, “Camp David Principles,” August 18, 2023.

U.S. allies such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. The U.S.-ROK alliance is the cornerstone of the ROK's foreign and security policy. It is therefore only natural that the ROK would take into account alliance cooperation when developing its policy toward a region in which the United States has placed considerable strategic interest. Even so, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy does not always move in lockstep with U.S. strategy. On the contrary, the ROK is far more cautious than countries such as Japan, Australia, or the Philippines about joining the chorus of criticism of China over questions of the regional order in the Indo-Pacific. In this respect, similarities can be seen with Southeast Asian states' pursuit of "hedging" within the strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry. Underlying this basic posture is the ROK's distinctive regional policy paradigm, which has been shaped by its historical experience.

The ROK's efforts to maintain balanced ties with both the United States and China, while promoting strategic coordination with the United States within that framework, have resulted in an Indo-Pacific policy centered not on traditional security (where its conduct would tie directly into great-power politics) but on nontraditional security, such as poverty, public health, climate change, and disaster relief. These efforts are also rooted in the ROK's diplomatic identity as a middle power.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section addresses the concept of the middle power in international relations, arguing that, through processes of acceptance and internalization, this has become the ROK's diplomatic identity. The country's Indo-Pacific policy has evolved in a manner consistent with that identity. The following section describes the historical development of ROK regional policy dating back to the Cold War, with the aim of identifying the policy paradigm that has been carried through to the present day. Building on this foundation, the final section examines the process by which the ROK began its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific, while drawing links to the elements analyzed in the preceding sections, in order to elucidate the layered contexts reflected in the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy.

1. The ROK's Diplomatic Identity as a Middle Power

(1) Leaving Behind Its “Small State” Self-Image

“When whales fight, the shrimp’s back is broken.” This old Korean proverb is frequently invoked in ROK diplomatic discourse as a metaphor for the country’s geopolitical predicament. In today’s context, the “whales” are the United States and China fighting over regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. They may sometimes also include Russia and Japan as great powers in geographic proximity to the Korean Peninsula. The “shrimp,” fatally injured when caught up in the conflicts among great powers, is of course the ROK. Deeply ingrained in this metaphor is the traditional self-perception in ROK diplomacy of the country as a “small state,” a passive object of great-power politics.²

By any objective measure, however, today’s ROK is no longer a “small state.” In nominal GDP, it stands alongside Mexico, Australia, and Spain, ranking just below the G7 countries and the major emerging economies of China, India, Brazil, and Russia.³ The ROK’s military expenditure surpasses that of Australia and even G7 members Canada and Italy, standing on a par with Japan.⁴ Having undergone a period of rapid economic growth during the Cold War as part of the liberal bloc and subsequently attaining political democratization at around the end of the Cold War, the ROK had quietly grown into a country that no longer fit its traditional “small state” self-image.

From the latter half of the 2000s, the international relations concept of the “middle power” became a frequent topic of debate among the

2) Even today, the term “four neighboring powers” is frequently used in the ROK to refer to Japan, the United States, China, and Russia. This hints at a deeply rooted paradigm that is distinctive to ROK diplomacy, whereby the ROK views these four countries as great powers that exceed its national strength and seeks to define its strategic position in relation to them.

3) International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, 2025.

4) Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, 2024.

ROK academic community,⁵ in large part due to the expansion of the country's national power. The ROK had also just joined the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2009, taking its place among the world's major donor nations.⁶ Now that it was no longer a "small state," what role should the ROK play in the international community? It was natural that, in their search for an answer, academics and officials would draw heavily on middle-power theory, which offered insights into the diplomatic conduct of middle powers.

The middle-power concept in international relations evolved as a means of analyzing the roles of states that, while not "great powers" themselves, nevertheless have an undeniable influence on international developments. According to the conventional understanding, middle powers are neither "great powers" capable of single-handedly producing meaningful impacts

-
- 5) For studies that analyze ROK diplomacy from the middle-power perspective, see Dlynn Armstrong-Williams, "South Korea as a Middle Power: The Growing Globalization of South Korean Foreign Policy in the 1990s," in *Transforming East Asian Domestic and International Politics: The Impact of Economy and Globalization*, ed. Robert W. Compton, Jr. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002); Jeffrey Robertson, "South Korea as a Middle Power: Capacity, Behavior, and Now Opportunity," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 151-174; Kim Woosang, "Korea as a Middle Power in the Northeast Asian Security Environment," in *The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order*, ed. G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Choi Young Jong, "South Korea's Regional Strategy and Middle Power Activism," *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 23, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 47-67; Lee Sook-Jong, "South Korea as New Middle Power: Seeking Complex Diplomacy," EAI Asia Security Initiative, Working Paper 25 (September 2012); Jojin V. John, "Becoming and Being a Middle Power: Exploring a New Dimension of South Korea's Foreign Policy," *China Report* 50, no. 4 (2014): 325-341; Scott A. Snyder, ed., *Middle-Power Korea: Contributions to the Global Agenda* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2015); Lee Sook Jong, ed., *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Lee Seungjoo and Kim Sangbae, eds., *Korea's Middle Power Diplomacy: Between Power and Network* (Cham: Springer, 2022); Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *South Korea's Grand Strategy: Making Its Own Destiny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); Sohn Yul, Kim Sangbae, and Lee Seungjoo, eds., *Hanguk ui junggyeon-guk oegyo: Yeoksa, iron, silje* [South Korea's middle-power diplomacy: History, theory, and practice] (Seoul: Myeongin Munhwasa, 2016); Kim Sangbae, Lee Seungjoo, and Chun Chaesung, eds., *Junggyeon-guk oegyo ui segye jeongchi: Geulrobeol, jijeok, guknae sanjung gujo sok ui daeeung jeonryak* [The world politics of middle-power diplomacy: Response strategies in the triple structure of global, regional, and domestic] (Seoul: Sahoe Pyeongron Academy, 2020).
- 6) Joseph Nye also considered that the ROK was becoming "an important middle-ranking power" in 2009. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "South Korea's Growing Soft Power," *Project Syndicate*, November 10, 2009.

on international politics, nor are they resigned to being “small states” subject to the whims of great-power politics. They emphasize multilateral cooperation as the principal means of influencing international politics.⁷ Cooperation among middle powers sharing common purposes is considered to be especially effective. Typical middle-power diplomacy includes playing a leading role in mediating international disputes and shaping international rules, and contributing to the stability of the international order by promoting multilateral cooperation. Such efforts are deemed to have produced measurable results, particularly in the realm of nontraditional security, which sits outside the logic of great-power politics.⁸

Academics continue to debate how precisely to define what is and is not a middle power.⁹ Some are even critical of the analytical utility of the concept. Even so, in an ROK searching for a new national identity beyond its “small state” self-image, middle-power theory was an intriguing concept that presented a clear way forward. Before long, its perspectives came to be woven into ROK foreign policy.¹⁰

The ROK’s middle-power diplomacy is typically considered to have started under the Lee Myung-bak administration, which took office in February 2008.¹¹ Arguing that ROK diplomacy had been confined within too narrow a horizon, President Lee Myung-bak put forward the vision of a “Global Korea” and committed the country to actively investing diplomatic resources in tackling so-called “global issues” such as poverty, transnational crime, public health, and climate change. Numerous diplomatic initiatives followed under the banner of Global Korea, including the expansion of official development assistance to developing countries and the championing

-
- 7) Robert O. Keohane offers a succinct definition: “a middle power is a state whose leaders consider that it cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution.” Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 296.
 - 8) For the conventional understanding of the middle-power concept, see Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993); Andrew F. Cooper, “Niche Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview,” in *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).
 - 9) Jeffrey Robertson, “Middle-power Definitions: Confusion Reigns Supreme,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (2017): 355-370.
 - 10) Jeffrey Robertson, “South Korea and the Middle Power Revival School,” Korea Economic Institute of America, October 3, 2023.
 - 11) Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 193.

of “Green Growth,” a concept aimed at reconciling environmental protection with economic growth. What most symbolized the Lee administration’s middle-power diplomacy, however, was its hosting of major international conferences in successive years. The ROK hosted the G20 Leaders’ Summit in Seoul in 2010, co-hosted the High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness with the OECD Development Assistance Committee in Busan in 2011, and hosted the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul in 2012, leading multilateral cooperation in fields such as development assistance and nuclear nonproliferation.

These initiatives by the Lee administration were inextricably tied to the broader national objective of breaking with the traditional “small state” self-image, as clearly demonstrated by the remarks made by President Lee at a press conference on the ROK’s successful bid to host the G20 Leaders’ Summit:

During the past century, we suffered the pain of watching our destiny fall into the hands of world powers because we were too weak. [...] The Republic has now, however, become one of the leading players in the international community recognized by advanced countries. We have been satisfied with playing only a passive role in setting the international order, leaving it to other nations, but now Korea has emerged as a pacesetter in helping forge a new framework for the world order. [...] The nation is now at a historic junction. Through successfully hosting the meeting, the country will contribute to the common growth and progress of the world. And we have to take advantage of the occasion to bolster the status of the country as well. [...] As the prestige and international status of the Republic rise, its role and responsibilities will increase in the international community. It is quite natural for a major central player to support and contribute to the cause of the international community. The country is on the threshold of joining the group of advanced nations on the strength of its successful experience as a developing economy and as a newly emerging economic powerhouse. This allows the country to act as a bridge linking all the members of the G20.¹²

The subsequent Park Geun-hye administration, which took office in February 2013, continued to embed the middle-power perspective in the ROK’s foreign policy. An early indication of this was the inclusion of the

12) Lee Myung-bak, “Remarks at a Special Press Conference on the Successful Bid to Host the G20 Summit in Korea,” September 30, 2009.

commitment to “becoming a responsible middle-power country contributing to world peace and development” in the new administration’s list of priority policies.¹³ About six months into the administration, in September 2013, it succeeded in launching MIKTA, an informal intergovernmental consultative framework comprising Mexico, Indonesia, the ROK, Turkey, and Australia. At the time, the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs described MIKTA as “a mechanism for cooperation between key middle-power countries” that would help “resolve issues facing the international community and maintain world peace.”¹⁴

The driving figure behind middle-power diplomatic initiatives under the Park Geun-hye administration, including the launch of MIKTA, was Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se. In a newspaper essay published in October 2013, Foreign Minister Yun provided the following explanation to the public regarding the significance of middle-power diplomacy for the ROK. The aspiration he expressed—of leaving the ROK’s “small state” status behind, moving on from having its destiny dictated by others, and actively shaping the international order—echoes the remarks by President Lee Myung-bak quoted above:

Middle-power diplomacy, in light of the ROK’s position in the international community, is a means of opening new horizons for ROK diplomacy. [...] Middle-power diplomacy seeks to move us beyond our former passive position of accepting the existing international order and to take on the role of regime architect, good-faith mediator, and bridge for shaping new orders. Middle-power diplomacy is, as it were, a land-reclamation project under ROK diplomacy that reshapes the landscape of the international stage.¹⁵

That said, the perspective of a middle-power diplomacy focused on global issues was not the only defining aspect of the Park Geun-hye administration’s foreign policy. Rather, the president’s principal interest in diplomatic and security matters concerned regional policy, that is, the

13) [ROK] Gwangye bucheo hapdong [Jointly by relevant ministries], “Bak Geunhye jeongbu gukjeong gwaje” [Park Geun-hye government’s national policy tasks], May 28, 2013.

14) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Launch of MIKTA, a Mechanism for Cooperation between Key Middle-Power Countries,” September 26, 2013.

15) Yun Byung-se, “Junggyeon-guk oegyo ro gukje sahoe wisang nopinda” [Middle-power diplomacy as a means to raise the ROK’s standing in the international community], *The Korea Economic Daily*, October 7, 2013.

ROK's engagement in the surrounding region.¹⁶ Behind this lay not only tensions in Japan-China relations and North Korea's military activities at the time, but also the emergence of a rivalry between the United States and China. The growing prominence of great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific was already beginning to cast a shadow over the ROK's still-nascent middle-power diplomacy.

(2) Middle-Power Activism amid Great-Power Competition

In November 2012, a month before the presidential election, Park Geun-hye laid out her vision of foreign policy in an essay titled "A Plan for Peace in North Asia," published in the *Wall Street Journal*. The essay's central thrust was to advocate that the ROK, China, and Japan should overcome disputes relating to the understanding of history and build relationships of trust in order to advance regional cooperation in Northeast Asia. The passage that bears citing here, however, is one in which President Park argued that "a forward-looking U.S.-China relationship" was essential for peace and stability in East Asia. It vividly encapsulates the anxiety that had taken hold in the ROK as signs of U.S.-China rivalry began to emerge:

I do not believe that a rising China and America's pivot to Asia are mutually exclusive. Rather, more transparent actions will serve as building blocks for a more secure and prosperous Northeast Asia. Both Korea and Japan maintain critical alliances with the United States while simultaneously sustaining closer cooperative partnerships with China. Our ties with these two powers are not premised on choosing one over the other.¹⁷

What is expressed here is a sense of crisis—that the ROK's position, dependent on the United States for security and on China economically, would be untenable if U.S.-China rivalry deepened. The point that this was a challenge shared by Japan and the ROK hints at an expectation that the two countries might cooperate in addressing it. This view of U.S.-China rivalry as a serious constraint on ROK diplomacy was not confined to Park

16) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 171.

17) Park Geun-hye, "A Plan for Peace in North Asia: Cooperation among Korea, China and Japan Needs a Correct Understanding of History," *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2012.

Geun-hye personally; it was widely shared across the ROK.¹⁸

If the ROK were to refuse to “choose one over the other” between the United States and China, it would first need a diplomatic concept that could avert a scenario of U.S.-China confrontation. In fact, the Park Geun-hye administration’s flagship foreign-policy concept, “trustpolitik,” which framed mutual trust among states as indispensable for regional peace and stability, carried just such an implication. Yet as the very fact that the ROK had to fall back on concepts such as “transparency” and “trust” plainly indicates, the influence the ROK could bring to bear in averting U.S.-China confrontation was inherently limited. As a result, the ROK directed its diplomatic energies toward avoiding entanglement in U.S.-China rivalry as much as possible and toward balanced relations with both.

There was scope for such diplomacy to bear fruit, at least on issues in which the United States and China had shared interests. The Park administration’s efforts to secure cooperation from both the United States and China for the denuclearization of North Korea, for example, might be rational under the international circumstances of the time. When it came to issues, such as the South China Sea, on which U.S. and Chinese positions sharply diverged, however, balancing relations with the two was not an easy task. Although the Park administration adopted a policy of avoiding public statements on the South China Sea issue to the greatest extent possible,¹⁹ maintaining such a stance entailed considerable difficulty in relations with the United States. At the joint press conference following the U.S.-ROK summit in October 2015, President Barack Obama issued the following pointed remarks about the Park administration’s stance, an episode that symbolized the challenges for ROK diplomacy under a strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry:

18) For example, when it was reported that, at a meeting of ROK foreign missions’ chiefs held in Seoul, Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se remarked that “[I]t could not be a headache or dilemma to receive love calls from both the U.S. and China. It could be, so to speak, a blessing,” it provoked sharp public criticism in the ROK, after which discussion of this kind largely subsided. “S. Korea Not in Dilemma over Rivalry between U.S., China: FM,” Yonhap News Agency, March 30, 2015; Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 217.

19) Terence Roehrig, “Caught in the Middle: South Korea and the South China Sea Arbitration Decision,” in *Asian Yearbook of International Law*, vol. 21, ed. Lee Seokwoo and Lee Hee Eun (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 57.

[T]here's no contradiction between the Republic of Korea having good relations with us, being a central part of our alliance, and having good [relations] with China. I think as I communicated to President Park, the only thing that we're going to continue to insist on is that we want China to abide by international norms and rules. And where they fail to do so, we expect the Republic of Korea to speak out on that, just as we do.²⁰

From a theoretical perspective, the growing rivalry between the great powers could pose a fundamental constraint on the ROK's still-nascent middle-power diplomacy. In fact, as noted above, President Park focused her attention on the realm of regional policy in light of the surrounding strategic environment. Even so, this did not cause middle-power discourse to fade in the ROK; rather, the opposite occurred. Driven by an urgent sense that the country must by all means avoid once again being subject to the whims of great-power politics, discussion of the role of the middle power in shaping the regional order grew all the more impassioned.²¹ A representative argument can be found in a contemporary essay analyzing the South China Sea issue from an ROK perspective. The piece sketched a picture in which regional states were connected to the United States as the security hub and to China as the economic hub in a hub-and-spoke pattern, and argued for the necessity of middle-power cooperation, on the grounds that linkages among the spoke countries could open up a path for them to lead the shaping of the regional order:

Indonesia, Australia and Korea can develop and deepen spoke-spoke networks and raise their common voice on regional affairs. In turn, this development will decrease the leeway for hub countries [the United States and China]. They will have less chance to unilaterally shape the regional order, potentially disregarding the strategic interests of regional medium and small countries. This is an important pre-condition for middle powers' role in the region.²²

20) [U.S.] White House, "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of the Republic of Korea in Joint Press Conference," October 16, 2015.

21) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 194.

22) Lee Jaehyon and Bong Youngshik Daniel, "South Korea's Strategic Distance from the South China Sea," in *The South China Sea: Middle Power Perspectives* (Australian National University, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, September 2016), 15.

After being adopted as an official policy term under the Park administration, the middle power concept gradually disappeared from ROK policy documents over the course of subsequent administrations. This should not, however, be read as a decline in the utility of middle-power theory for ROK diplomacy. Rather, it is better understood as a reflection of the fact that its essence has become so internalized as part of ROK diplomatic identity that there is no longer any need to invoke the concept explicitly.²³ The address by Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, a member of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, at the General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2024, reads as a textbook expression of middle-power thinking. Sounding the alarm over the global trends of resurgent great-power politics and retreating multilateralism, Foreign Minister Cho declared the ROK's commitment to being a "champion" of the multilateral system and passionately argued that under the Yoon administration's vision of being a "Global Pivotal State," the ROK would play the roles of "facilitator" for peacebuilding around the world, "supporter" of the economic development of the Global South, and "initiator" in shaping international norms and governance arrangements for emerging technologies.²⁴

As discussed below, it was under the Moon Jae-in administration, which followed the Park administration, that the ROK began its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Put another way, the broad area now encompassed by the term "Indo-Pacific," which includes Southeast Asia and Oceania, had originally been conceived of in ROK diplomacy as being part of the global domain and not directly tied to issues specific to the Korean Peninsula; that is to say, the area was viewed as being the target of the ROK's middle-power diplomacy. In that sense, today's ROK Indo-Pacific policy was built on a foundation of middle-power diplomatic efforts. These contextual factors explain why the ROK has anchored its Indo-Pacific policy in nontraditional security and occasionally signals interest in cooperation with fellow middle powers such as Australia and Indonesia.

The ROK's Indo-Pacific policy, however, reflects not only the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity but also a distinctive regional policy

23) Monica S. Jeong, "Rethinking Middle Power as Identity: The Case of South Korea," *Journal of East Asia Security* 1, no. 1 (May 2025): 13-17.

24) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Remarks by H.E. Cho Tae-yul, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea: General Debate, 79th Session of the UN General Assembly," September 27, 2024.

paradigm shaped by historical experience. The next section therefore charts the development of ROK regional policy over time and illustrates the substance of that paradigm.

2. The Structure of the ROK's Regional Policy Paradigm

(1) The Security Bond of the Japan-U.S.-ROK Trilateral: The Framework of Deterrence against North Korea

Since the Cold War, ROK regional policy has been organized primarily around responding to the threat posed by North Korea. The principal instrument has, of course, been the U.S.-ROK alliance. When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, the United States, determined to defend the ROK, organized a UN command and intervened militarily, saving the country from an existential crisis. After an armistice agreement was concluded in July 1953, the United States maintained the United Nations Command to monitor the armistice and entered into the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, continuing to commit itself to the ROK's defense. Even today, the presence of 28,500 U.S. troops stationed in the ROK and the United States' enduring commitment to deploy sufficient forces to complete the defense of the ROK in a contingency provide the foundation of deterrence against North Korea.

For the U.S.-ROK alliance to fully perform its function of deterring North Korea in peacetime and responding effectively to it in a contingency, Japan in fact plays a critically important role.²⁵ The ROK government has itself spoken plainly about this circumstance, as illustrated by the following passage in President Yoon Suk-yeol's address at the August 2023 Liberation Day commemoration. Speaking on the eve of the Camp David Japan-U.S.-ROK summit, President Yoon urged the public to understand the importance of cooperation with Japan, drawing attention to the fact that UN Command bases located in Japan are deeply tied to the ROK's security:

25) For more on this, see Ishida Tomonori, "Beigun kichi ga tsunagu Nihon to Kankoku: Chosen hanto yuji to 'Nichi-Bei-Kan' anpo renkei" [Japan and the ROK as connected by U.S. military bases: Japan-U.S.-ROK security ties in a Korean contingency], in *Kankoku to tsunagaru* [How does Japan redefine what Korea means?], ed. Asaba Yuki (Tokyo: Yuhikaku, 2024).

The seven rear bases provided to the United Nations Command by the government of Japan serve as the greatest deterrent which keeps the North from invading the South. A renewed North Korean invasion will trigger an automatic and immediate intervention and retaliation by the UN Command, and the UN Command-rear in Japan is sufficiently equipped with necessary land, sea and air capabilities. The UN Command is a great example of international solidarity that has played a key role in firmly safeguarding the Republic of Korea's freedom "under one flag."²⁶

President Yoon was thus referring to the military arrangement, dating back to the Cold War, by which a portion of U.S. bases in Japan serve as rear support hubs for UN Command forces engaged in defensive operations on the Korean Peninsula in a contingency.²⁷ To put it another way, the ROK's foreign and security policy, which is anchored in the U.S.-ROK alliance and focused primarily on the threat posed by North Korea, has fundamentally depended on Japan's cooperation in a contingency. Today, with the security environment around the ROK growing ever more severe, there is all the more reason for the ROK to maintain this framework of deterrence against North Korea, without letting it weaken. These dynamics emanating from the U.S.-ROK alliance form the backdrop to the ROK's deepening Indo-Pacific engagement, its advancement of trilateral Japan-U.S.-ROK security cooperation, and its gradual embrace of military cooperation with select countries such as Australia and the Philippines.

That being said, the dynamics of the U.S.-ROK alliance do not place unlimited constraints on the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy. As noted earlier, they largely function within the ROK's broader strategic objective of maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and China. This is borne out by the fact that the ROK remains extremely cautious on issues on which U.S. and Chinese positions sharply diverge, such as the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. On such matters, it hesitates to go beyond statements of principled positions on the rule of law, such as the importance

26) Yoon Suk-yeol, "Je78junyeon gwangbokjeol gyeongchuksa" [Address commemorating the 78th Liberation Day], August 15, 2023.

27) The seven U.S. military bases in Japan designated as UN bases are Camp Zama, Yokosuka Naval Base, Sasebo Naval Base, Yokota Air Base, Kadena Air Base, Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, and White Beach Naval Facility (as of December 2025).

of freedom of navigation, peace and stability in the region, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.²⁸

(2) The Evolution of Nordpolitik in the Post-Cold War Period: The Framework of Engagement with North Korea

Throughout the Cold War, the ROK's regional policy was fundamentally defined by the paradigm of deterrence against North Korea. With the end of the Cold War, however, it came to be characterized by a new paradigm. The fundamental transformation of the international environment afforded ROK diplomacy room to construct a framework of engagement with North Korea.

Seizing on the international momentum toward détente, the ROK established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 and with China in 1992. The driving force behind these changes was the “Nordpolitik” (Northern Policy) put forward by the Roh Tae-woo administration. In July 1988, President Roh issued a special declaration with a view to ending North-South antagonism, calling for opening channels between North and South, supporting the improvement of North Korean relations with Japan and the United States, and announcing the ROK's intent to normalize diplomatic relations with socialist states. This served as the catalyst for active diplomatic contact among the six countries: the two Koreas plus Japan, the United States, China, and Russia. As part of these developments, North and South Korea were simultaneously admitted to the United Nations in 1991, and at the end of that year, the “Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North” was signed.

The ROK carried forward the successful experience of Nordpolitik into subsequent diplomatic efforts. Engagement with China and Russia with the aim of bringing the North to the diplomatic table became the ROK's standard

28) Adam P. Liff, “Beyond Territorial Defense...? The U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK Alliances and a ‘Taiwan Strait Contingency,’” *Pacific Review* 38, no. 3 (2025): 443-472. In recent years, former senior ROK military officials, among others, have argued that the ROK should accommodate U.S. requests to permit U.S. Forces Korea to deploy outside the Korean Peninsula, taking into consideration a potential Taiwan contingency scenario. “U.S. Seeks Strategic Flexibility against Rising China,” *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 6, 2025. However, the ROK has shown little inclination to view a Taiwan contingency scenario as a matter of its own immediate concern, as evidenced, for example, by Lee Jae-myung's reiteration during the May 2025 presidential campaign of his personal view that the ROK should not be involved in Taiwan Strait issues. “U.S. Experts Voice Concerns over Lee Jae-myung's Foreign Policy Stance,” *Chosun Daily*, May 16, 2025.

approach. Notwithstanding different emphases between conservative and progressive parties, in the post-Cold War period, the ROK can generally be said to have developed a regional policy that was based on a creative combination of elements of the Cold War-era framework of deterrence against North Korea and the post-Cold War framework of engagement with it. The same logic applied to the Park Geun-hye administration's announcement of the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), which was aimed at reinitiating inter-Korean relations after the collapse of the Six-Party Talks framework among the two Koreas, Japan, the United States, China, and Russia.

Park Geun-hye had referred to NAPCI even before her election to the presidency.²⁹ Its substance, however, was fleshed out in detail only around the time of her inauguration in February 2013.³⁰ The specifics are set out in an April 2013 essay by First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kyou-hyun in the ROK domestic journal *Oegyo* [Foreign Relations].³¹ As suggested by Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se's later contribution to *Global Asia*, an English-language essay apparently based on Kim's piece,³² the Kim essay served in effect as a quasi-official document explaining the Park administration's foreign policy.

In an essay titled "The Park Geun-hye Government's Foreign Policy," Vice Minister Kim Kyou-hyun pointed out that "issues of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia are intimately interrelated" and argued that, in order to create an international environment that would push North Korea toward denuclearization, the ROK "must formulate a common strategy with relevant countries, especially major regional actors like the United States and China, and build trust among the two Koreas and surrounding stakeholders." He set as an objective "wisely overcoming the various conflicts that exist among the surrounding core stakeholder countries, such as the

29) Park Geun-hye, "A Plan for Peace in North Asia."

30) Lee Jong-won, "Kankoku Paku Kune seiken no Hokuto Ajia heiwa kyoryoku koso (NAPCI): Kankoku no midoru pawa ron to chiikishugi gaiko no bunmyaku o chushin ni" [Analysis of Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) by the Park Geun-hye administration: From the perspective of middle power theory and regionalist diplomacy in the ROK], *Ajia Taiheiyō Tokyū* [Journal of Asia-Pacific studies], no. 28 (March 2017): 15.

31) Kim Kyou-hyun, "Bak Geunhye jeongbu ui daeoe jeongchaek" [The Park Geun-hye government's foreign policy], *Oegyo* [Foreign Relations], no. 105 (April 2013).

32) Yun Byung-se, "Park Geun-hye's Trustpolitik: A New Framework for South Korea's Foreign Policy," *Global Asia* 8, no. 3 (September 2013).

United States, China, Japan, and Russia, in order to construct a cooperative Northeast Asian order.” As the means to that end, he laid out the concept of “expanding multilateral cooperation among Northeast Asian states and creating venues for dialogue and cooperation that can alleviate conflicts,” proposing an approach of “accumulating small but meaningful habits of cooperation in nontraditional security fields beneficial to all parties: energy, logistics, the environment, nuclear safety, counter-terrorism, narcotics, and disaster relief” as a first step toward building trust. It was, in effect, a vision of multilateral regional cooperation that combined Nordpolitik with the logic of middle-power diplomacy.

Beginning with President Park’s visits to the United States in May 2013 and to China the following month, the ROK government devoted considerable diplomatic effort to securing the support of relevant countries for NAPCI. Despite this, the initiative failed to gain the momentum needed to come to fruition and produced no notable results. One reason was that the United States was wary of an initiative that included China as a partner.³³ Once Japan-ROK relations became deadlocked over disputes around the understanding of history and Russia unilaterally declared the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the initiative effectively ceased to have any viable basis.

As its initial vision of multilateral regional cooperation reached an impasse, the Park administration shifted its regional policy toward bilateral approaches, while keeping the management of the North Korean problem at its core. The first focus was diplomacy aimed at advancing relations with China. The highlight came in September 2015, when President Park accepted China’s invitation to attend the commemoration of victory in the war against Japan held in Tiananmen Square and stood alongside President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin to view the military parade. Behind such efforts lay the expectation that China would exercise its influence to constrain North Korea, which continued to engage in military provocations. That expectation, however, soon turned to disappointment. In response to North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016, the ROK pressed China for a UN Security Council sanctions resolution, but China’s response was tepid throughout.³⁴

As the Park administration’s hopes for Chinese engagement on the North Korea problem rapidly faded, it tilted toward strengthening the

33) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 179; Lee, “Kankoku Paku Kune seiken no Hokuto Ajia heiwa kyoryoku koso (NAPCI),” 19.

34) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 182.

U.S.-ROK alliance, agreeing with the United States in July 2016 to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, long sought by the U.S. side, with U.S. Forces Korea.³⁵ China, meanwhile, viewed the THAAD deployment in the ROK as part of a U.S. containment strategy and responded with a series of retaliatory economic measures against the ROK. China-ROK relations rapidly chilled as a result.³⁶

The cumulative experience of the Park administration thus revealed the difficulty, in a strategic environment of accelerating U.S.-China rivalry, of pursuing a regional policy that was based on traditional paradigmatic lines with an exclusive focus on Northeast Asia. The sense of impasse this generated would in turn produce greater dynamism in ROK diplomacy, with the search for new strategic horizons.

3. The ROK's Venture of Expanding Its Strategic Horizon to the Indo-Pacific

(1) The New Southern Policy: A Major Turning Point

As evidenced by the launch of the New Northern Policy as one of its central diplomatic initiatives, President Moon Jae-in was quite eager to pursue an engagement policy toward North Korea from the outset of his inauguration in May 2017. According to the Moon Jae-in Government's Five-Year Plan of State Affairs, a compilation of the administration's policy directions, the New Northern Policy was a "continental strategy" aimed at "strengthening cooperation across Eurasia," with concrete content including the promotion of "South Korea-North Korea-Russia trilateral cooperation" and "participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative."³⁷

The Moon administration's diplomatic initiative of note here, however, is the New Southern Policy, advanced as the "maritime strategy" paired with

35) Roehrig, "Caught in the Middle," 106; Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 182-184. For an analysis of the significance of the THAAD deployment within the U.S.-ROK alliance, see Choi Yong Sub, "Keeping the Americans in: The THAAD Deployment on the Korean Peninsula in the Context of Sino-American Rivalry," *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no. 4 (2020): 632-652.

36) Jung H. Pak, "Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China's Approach to South Korea," Brookings Institution, July 2020.

37) [ROK] Gukjeong gihoek jamun wiwonhoe [State affairs planning advisory committee], *Mun Jaen jeongbu gukjeong unyeong 5gaenyeon gyehoek* [Moon Jae-in government's five-year plan of state affairs], July 2017, 140.

the New Northern Policy.³⁸ It was, in effect, the genesis of the ROK's policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region today. ROK regional policy, hitherto built around the North Korea issue, opened up a markedly new strategic horizon at this point: the Indo-Pacific.

The essence of the New Southern Policy is captured succinctly in the electoral pledges put forward by the Democratic Party for the presidential election. Among its foreign-policy commitments was a pledge to "elevate diplomacy with ASEAN and India to the same level as the four neighboring powers in economic, political, and strategic terms."³⁹ This was the first time that anything other than the so-called "four neighboring powers" (Japan, the United States, China, and Russia) was presented as principal targets of ROK foreign policy.⁴⁰ It is also notable that Oceania was excluded from the New Southern Policy's geographic scope. In light of the substance of the ROK's bilateral relationships, it would have been natural for Australia and New Zealand to fall within the policy's scope.⁴¹ One possibility, albeit a purely speculative one, is that the ROK was concerned that inclusion of these countries as cooperation partners might have strategic implications with regard to China.⁴²

38) Ibid., 140. In the same document, alongside the New Northern Policy and the New Southern Policy, the Moon administration also set out a "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation" concept aimed at "institutionalizing minilateral cooperation among major Northeast Asian states." Its specific aims include "strengthening ROK-China-Japan trilateral cooperation," "the sustained promotion and reinforcement of MIKTA," and "exploration of various forms of middle-power cooperation within East Asia."

39) Democratic Party of Korea, *Je19dae daetongryeong seongeo jeongchaek gongyakjip: Nara reul nara dapge* [19th presidential election policy pledge collection: A nation worthy of being called a nation], April 2017, 235.

40) Lee Jong-won, "Kankoku Mun Je-in seiken no chiikishugi gaiko to 'shin Nanpo seisaku': 'Indo Taiheiyo senryaku' to 'Ittai Ichiro' no hazama no midoru pawa gaiko" [Moon Jae-in's regionalist diplomacy and the New Southern Policy: An attempt for middle power diplomacy between FOIP and BRI], *Ajia Taiheiyo Tokyu* [Journal of Asia-Pacific studies], no. 39 (March 2020): 63.

41) Kim Joon-hyung, a Moon foreign-policy adviser and Handong Global University professor (at the time) who served on the State Affairs Planning Advisory Committee that drafted the "Five-Year Plan for the Administration of State Affairs," explained the Moon administration's foreign-policy concept in a November 2017 essay. While noting the importance of securing the ROK's "strategic position amid the U.S.-China conflict," he candidly stated that "Korea should strengthen its cooperation with Australia and New Zealand as much as possible," in addition to ASEAN and India. Kim Joon-hyung, "The Moon Administration's Multilateral Regional Diplomacy: An Initiative of Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility," *ROK Angle*, no. 165 (November 2, 2017).

42) For a similar observation, see Peter J. Dean, *The South Korea-Australia Partnership: State of Play* (United States Studies Centre, October 2024).

It was President Moon himself who drove the New Southern Policy. He chose his November 2017 state visit to Indonesia as the venue for unveiling the policy. In his speech, President Moon emphasized that the policy rested on three pillars of “people,” “peace,” and “prosperity,” and stressed that elevating relations with ASEAN was the policy’s principal focus.⁴³ Immediately after Indonesia, President Moon paid state visits to Vietnam and the Philippines. He also paid further state visits to Vietnam and Singapore in 2018 and to Brunei, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos in 2019 ahead of the November 2019 ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit, thereby visiting all (then) ASEAN member states. During this period, he also paid a state visit to India in 2018. Thus, President Moon had personally enacted the New Southern Policy’s commitment to substantially elevate ROK relations with ASEAN and India.

A key factor behind the Moon administration’s adoption of the New Southern Policy is the shock of China’s harsh economic retaliation against the deployment of THAAD in the ROK. The Democratic Party’s abovementioned electoral platform sets out a policy direction of “actively developing ASEAN and India as our country’s trade and investment markets, on a par with Japan and China, in order to address protectionism and to escape excessive economic dependence on China.”⁴⁴ To put it another way, when the ROK perceived the risks of “excessive” economic dependence on China and looked for new economic partners, the first names that came to mind were ASEAN and India. As this suggests, the New Southern Policy was fundamentally an initiative driven by economic considerations. At least at its starting point, security considerations were comparatively thin.

A second background factor is wariness about being asked to align with other countries’ policy concepts for the Indo-Pacific. Particularly in mind was Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept. On November 9, 2017, the day before the announcement of the New Southern Policy, Adviser to the President for Economic Affairs Kim Hyun-chul, who was the policy’s lead architect and accompanied President Moon on his state visit to Indonesia, gave a press briefing in Jakarta in which he explained the aim of the New Southern Policy. This came in the wake of the November 6 U.S.-Japan summit, at a time when the Trump administration was gradually

43) [ROK] Blue House, “Han-Inni bijeuniseu poreom gijo yeonseol” [Keynote speech at the Korea-Indonesia Business Forum], November 10, 2017.

44) Democratic Party of Korea, *Je19dae daetongryeong seongeo jeongchaek gongyakjip*, 236.

leaning toward supporting the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept. The explanation was as follows:

ASEAN is a strategic crossroads through which one-third of global maritime traffic passes. It is where continental and maritime forces meet. For this reason, Japan is attempting to construct a kind of diplomatic line called the Indo-Pacific line, connecting Japan, Australia, India, and the United States, but we do not need to be incorporated into it. We should not be part of such an adversarial structure. Instead, we must make strategic use of this strategic crossroads. As a middle power and as a bridging state, there is much we can contribute.⁴⁵

Adviser Kim's remarks make clear that an essential foundation of the New Southern Policy was the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity. To put it another way, the New Southern Policy was the ROK's own way of practicing middle-power diplomacy, developed as part of its efforts to seek "strategic" engagement in the Indo-Pacific while distancing itself from competition among the great powers. In that sense, it was only natural that, as a body of concrete initiatives, the New Southern Policy should have focused exclusively on cooperation in the field of nontraditional security.⁴⁶

(2) Prudent Coordination with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

As the Trump administration began to articulate its own Indo-Pacific strategy, alignment between the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the ROK's New Southern Policy became an issue between the two governments. At the joint press conference following the U.S.-ROK summit in late June 2019, President Moon stated, "Under the regional cooperation principles of openness, inclusiveness and transparency, we have agreed to put forth harmonious cooperation between Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy."⁴⁷

45) [ROK] Blue House, "Gim Hyeoncheol gyeongje bojwagwan beuriping" [Briefing by adviser to the president for economic affairs Kim Hyun-chul], November 9, 2017.

46) Oh Yoon Ah, "Change or Continuity? Seoul's Approach to Southeast Asia under the New Southern Policy," *Korea Observer* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 103-126.

47) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Joint Press Conference Following Korea-U.S. Summit," June 30, 2019.

Yet the ROK's New Southern Policy never came to be assimilated into the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Fact Sheet published in November 2020 as the outcome of working-level consultations between the Moon and Trump administrations enumerates a cooperation agenda in nontraditional security fields, such as development cooperation, energy security, climate change, public health, counternarcotics, cybersecurity, and disaster response, that are aligned with the New Southern Policy's framework of "people," "peace," and "prosperity."⁴⁸ Evident throughout is the ROK's deep-seated reluctance to engage in traditional security matters in the Indo-Pacific. As an instrument through which the ROK, as a middle power, could maintain its distinctive position between the United States and China, the New Southern Policy did indeed perform its function.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration, which took office in May 2022, built on the previous administration's achievements under the New Southern Policy, while explicitly shifting the center of gravity of its North Korea policy from engagement to deterrence and clearly articulating a posture of close coordination with the United States on its Indo-Pacific policy. In its Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, announced in December 2022, the Yoon administration declared its determination to "uphold international norms and strengthen a rules-based order built on the universal values including freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights," and set out a clear position of promoting "solidarity with nations sharing these universal values" and of opposing "unilateral change of status quo by force,"⁴⁹ thus demonstrating a distinct shift in diplomatic stance from the previous administration.

At the same time, the Yoon administration maintained the previous administration's emphasis on relations with ASEAN, as illustrated by President Yoon's introduction of the outline of his Indo-Pacific Strategy at the November 2022 ASEAN-ROK Summit, prior to its formal release, and the concurrent launch of the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative.⁵⁰ The upgrading of ASEAN-ROK relations to a Comprehensive Strategic

48) [U.S.] Department of State, "Fact Sheet: The United States of America and The Republic of Korea on Working Together to Promote Cooperation between the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the New Southern Policy," November 13, 2020.

49) [ROK] Government, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, December 2022, 8-9.

50) [ROK] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI)," April 11, 2023.

Partnership at the October 2024 ASEAN-ROK Summit was the fruit of cumulative efforts originating in the New Southern Policy.

The Yoon administration also explicitly broadened the geographic scope of the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy and announced its intention to strengthen relations not only with Australia and New Zealand but also with Pacific Island countries. Emblematic of these efforts were the ROK's holding of the inaugural Korea-Pacific Islands Summit in May 2023, as well as its continuous engagement with the framework of NATO Indo-Pacific Partners (IP4) comprising Japan, the ROK, Australia, and New Zealand, beginning with the inaugural summit in late June 2022.

That said, it would be wrong to conclude that the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy underwent an irreversible qualitative change under the Yoon administration. Rather, even with the Yoon administration's hard shift toward U.S. alliance cooperation, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy continued to evolve within the strategic objective of maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and China, underscoring the continued salience of the ROK's traditional regional policy paradigm. It is telling that in the description of the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, the Yoon administration positioned China as "a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region" and explicitly stated that "our inclusive Indo-Pacific Strategy neither targets nor excludes any specific nation."⁵¹ On issues that China designates as "core interests," such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, even the Yoon administration remained extremely cautious about going beyond statements of principled positions on the rule of law.⁵²

It is premature to conclude that, under the Yoon administration, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy extended into the realm of traditional security. A more accurate reading is that the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy continues to evolve within the framework of middle-power diplomacy.

51) [ROK] Government, *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, 11, 14.

52) Liff, "Beyond Territorial Defense..."

Conclusion

Notwithstanding different emphases between conservative and progressive parties, in the post-Cold War period, the ROK can generally be said to have developed a regional policy that was based on a creative combination of elements of the Cold War-era framework of deterrence against North Korea and the post-Cold War framework of engagement with it. To put it another way, the evolution of the ROK's regional policy in this period was premised on maintaining balanced relations with both the United States and with China and was focused above all on addressing the problem of North Korea. This was made possible by the relative stability of great-power relations around the Korean Peninsula in the post-Cold War period.

Today, far from receding, the threat from North Korea has only grown more serious. From the ROK's perspective at least, the policy frameworks of deterrence and engagement with North Korea remain meaningful. Yet under the strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry, sustaining a traditional regional policy that combines these two frameworks has become increasingly difficult. As a U.S. ally, moreover, the ROK is constantly called upon to engage with the Indo-Pacific in ways that meet U.S. strategic requirements.

The ROK, however, does not have the option of stepping into the same arena as the two great powers and basing its engagement in the Indo-Pacific around power politics. Attempting to do so would expose it to the frontlines of U.S.-China rivalry and would clearly accelerate Chinese support for North Korea.⁵³ In short, participating in power politics under the strategic environment of U.S.-China rivalry is beyond the ROK's current national capacity.

For this reason, it was natural that, when the ROK sought to expand its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific while carefully avoiding entanglement in U.S.-China rivalry, it concentrated on initiatives in nontraditional security fields. Such a positioning suited the ROK's middle-power diplomatic identity and was deemed to be compatible with its post-Cold War regional policy paradigm based on a combination of elements from its frameworks of deterrence against North Korea and engagement with it.

In sum, it has not been long since the ROK began its policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and the country is still in the process of finding its footing in the region. Looking ahead, the ROK's Indo-Pacific policy is likely to continue to fluctuate in response to partisan divisions at home and

53) Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, 220.

developments in U.S.-ROK and China-ROK relations abroad.⁵⁴ Still, there is little prospect of the ROK leading the United States' regional allies in deciding to militarily confront China and orienting its engagement in the Indo-Pacific around power politics. The conclusion of this chapter, rather, is that, circumstances permitting, the ROK will continue to develop its Indo-Pacific policy as an extension of middle-power diplomacy.

54) For example, the impeachment motion submitted by opposition parties following President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of martial law in December 2024 initially included the following language, which foreshadows the possibility of such fluctuation: "[President Yoon Suk-yeol], under the guise of so-called values diplomacy, has disregarded the geopolitical balance, treated North Korea, China, and Russia as adversaries, clung to a peculiar Japan-centered foreign policy, appointed individuals inclined toward Japan to key government posts, and, through such policies, has invited isolation in Northeast Asia, triggered the risk of war, and abandoned national security and the duty to protect the people." "Ya 6dang baluihan 'Yun Seokyeol daetongryeong tanhaek sochu an' (jeonmun)" [Six opposition parties' 'impeachment motion against President Yoon Suk-yeol' (full text)], *The Chosun Ilbo*, December 5, 2024.



Competitive Pluralization and Australia

AUKUS and Economic Security

SATAKE Tomohiko

Chapter 5

AUKUS leaders meeting at Naval Base Point
Loma in San Diego, California, March 13, 2023
(Photo: Adam Schultz/White House/Planet Pix
via ZUMA Press Wire/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

This chapter examines Australia's response to "competitive pluralization" through two cases: AUKUS in the military domain and economic security policies in the economic domain. Under AUKUS, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States are advancing integration of the defense industrial base in the fields of nuclear-powered submarines and emerging technology cooperation. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including export controls and constraints on Australian autonomy. In economic security, Australia is pursuing trade diversification, supply chain resilience, and the protection of domestic industries and critical technologies. Yet, it faces a difficult dilemma posed by shortages of capital and labor, persistent dependence on China in trade and the clean energy transition, and pressure from the Trump administration's tariff regime and China policy. Australia is likely to expand cooperation with partners including Japan, while maintaining the U.S.-Australia alliance and AUKUS, with the aim of ensuring strategic latitude amid deepening dependence on both the United States and China.

Introduction

This chapter analyzes Australia's response to the "pluralizing" interstate competition. Located "Down Under," in the far reaches of the Southern Hemisphere and surrounded by ocean on all sides, Australia long enjoyed insulation from direct foreign threats after the Second World War. In recent years, however, China's rise and its expanding influence in the South China Sea and South Pacific have prompted rapid calls within Australia to strengthen defense capabilities with the Chinese threat in mind. As a close ally of the United States, Australia must also inevitably contend with the consequences of U.S.-China rivalry. Under these circumstances, Australia has increasingly played the part of a "participant" in the interstate competition in the Indo-Pacific, including the establishment of a trilateral security framework with the United States and the United Kingdom (AUKUS) and the pursuit of economic security policies.

To recap, the volume's central concept, "competitive pluralization," can be disaggregated into three dimensions: the domains of competition, the means of competition, and partnerships. In addition to the military and ideological competition that defined the U.S.-Soviet rivalry of the Cold War, recent years have seen intensifying competition in non-military domains such as economic security and energy security, with diverse actors engaged in varied forms of competition across each domain. As the use of economic interdependence as a means of applying political and diplomatic pressure on other states, that is, "the weaponization of interdependence," becomes increasingly common, it has become an urgent priority for governments to build economic relationships that are not dependent on any single country. In the military domain as well, new domains such as cyber and space are growing in importance. Accordingly, many countries have recognized the need not only to secure an advantage in individual domains, but also to strengthen integrated capabilities that span multiple domains.

Alongside this pluralization of the domains of competition, the means of shaping competition have also pluralized. In the military domain, particularly since Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea, attention has shifted from conventional kinetic capabilities involving physical destruction to non-kinetic means such as cyber, information warfare, and cognitive warfare, as well as to "hybrid warfare" involving a combination thereof. The development of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum technology is accelerating this pluralization of means in new domains. In relation to economic security as well, the pursuit of state

objectives through economic instruments, known as “economic statecraft,” together with countermeasures such as greater resilience and diversification of trade and supply chains, has become more important than ever as a means of prevailing in interstate competition.

No country can prevail in competitive pluralization on its own; cooperation with “like-minded partners” is indispensable. Cold War Asia was structured around a U.S.-centered “hub-and-spokes” system of mutually exclusive bilateral alliances, presumably because the domains of competition were limited in their scope and largely confined to the military sphere. As interstate competition has pluralized across both domains and means, however, cooperation with countries with comparative advantages in particular domains has developed in increasingly layered ways. So-called “minilateral” cooperation, that is, small-scale, function-specific multilateral cooperation, is one prominent example.¹ Besides traditional alliance cooperation, states are pluralizing their security partnerships through such minilateral arrangements and through cooperation with countries other than the United States.

How, then, is Australia responding to competitive pluralization in this sense? This chapter examines two cases: AUKUS as a response to pluralization in the military domain, and Australia’s economic security policies as a response to pluralization in the economic domain. AUKUS is one of the region’s most prominent examples of minilateral cooperation. Cooperation under AUKUS spans wide-ranging fields such as nuclear-powered submarines and emerging technology capabilities, making it an ideal case for examining competitive pluralization. Australia’s economic security policies have attracted less attention than AUKUS but have assumed growing importance in recent years as a means of countering China’s economic statecraft, including economic coercion.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 1 examines the current state of AUKUS and future prospects. It shows that while AUKUS, which seeks to integrate the defense industrial base, has achieved important results, it also faces numerous challenges. Section 2 discusses the background to the rising prominence of economic security in Australia, along with the policies pursued and the challenges that remain. Building on this analysis, the

1) For minilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, see Satake Tomohiko, “2022 nen wagakuni anzen hoshō no shiza (4): Indo Taiheiyo ni okeru minilateralizumu no taito” [Perspectives on Japan’s Security in 2022 (4): The Rise of Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific], *NIDS Commentary*, May 31, 2022. For more recent developments, see Oguma Shinya, “Indo Taiheiyo chiiki ni okeru minilateralu kyōryoku no yukue” [The Future of Minilateral Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region], *NIDS Commentary*, May 20, 2025.

chapter then identifies elements common to AUKUS and economic security policies, and considers the general features, challenges, and future prospects of Australia's response to competitive pluralization.

1. AUKUS²

(1) What Is AUKUS?

AUKUS is an Australia-U.K.-U.S. security cooperation framework that emerged somewhat suddenly in September 2021. It is built around two pillars: a “first pillar” providing for the U.S. and U.K. transfer of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, and a “second pillar” focused on emerging technologies including AI, quantum technologies, and cyber capabilities. With respect to the first pillar, an “Optimal Pathway” for delivering nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and for their domestic construction has been announced, and preparations are under way. As for the second pillar, cooperation is advancing in each subfield, and the three countries have taken concrete steps toward the operationalization of new technologies, including conducting trial demonstrations of unmanned underwater vehicles.³

The factors that drove AUKUS's creation included not only China's rapid naval buildup but also its rapidly advancing capabilities in emerging technology fields. A study by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute analyzing private-sector research in emerging technologies worldwide found that Chinese firms hold the lead in 37 of 44 fields and that the world's top 10 research institutions are all based in China. The study further found that nearly half of the most influential papers published over the past five years were authored by Chinese researchers.⁴ Against this backdrop, a central mission of the second pillar is for Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to recover their competitive advantage over China through

-
- 2) Portions of this section draw on Satake Tomohiko, “AUKUS ni miru kokubo sangyo kiban togo no kanosei to genkai” [The Possibilities and Limits of Defense Industrial Base Integration as Seen in AUKUS], a paper presented at the Japan Association of International Relations 2025 Annual Convention, Panel A-5 “International Integration,” October 17, 2025.
 - 3) [Australia] Department of Defence, “AUKUS Defence Ministers’ Joint Statement,” April 9, 2024 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-04-09/aukus-defence-ministers-joint-statement>.
 - 4) Jamie Gaida et al., “ASPI’s Critical Technology Tracker: The Global Race for Future Power,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 1, 2023 <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/critical-technology-tracker>.

joint technology development and innovation across diverse fields.

This cooperation is reflective of a relationship shaped by shared membership in the Five Eyes, an Anglophone intelligence partnership, and historical and cultural affinities. Apart from the United States and China, advanced capabilities in emerging technologies are concentrated in a handful of European countries, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea.⁵ If the goal were merely to advance technological cooperation, there would be no inherent need for Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to create this exclusive framework. The reason these three countries opted to establish a “second pillar” is that AUKUS extends beyond mere submarine transfers and joint emerging-technology development to encompass the integration of the defense industrial base.

The integration of the defense industrial base has not been firmly defined. For the purposes of this chapter, it can be tentatively understood as the unification of the institutional, market, and research environments around the three countries’ defense industries.⁶ On the institutional side, for example, the three countries are working to mutually relax export controls and create a “license-free” environment in which using one another’s technology no longer requires case-by-case authorization. As discussed below, the regulatory reforms of 2024 substantially eliminated the requirement to obtain export permits among the three countries. The trilateral agreement on submarine cooperation likewise sets out common standards for the protection of classified information and intellectual property rights, advancing the unification of rules and operational standards.⁷

Market integration encompasses procurement, contracting frameworks, and the unification of interoperable supply chains. With respect to supply chains in particular, efforts are under way to enable Australian firms to participate in U.S. and U.K. defense supply chains, including those for nuclear-powered submarines. In addition to acquiring its own submarines,

5) See, for example, *Global Innovation Index 2025: Innovation at a Crossroads*, World Intellectual Property Organization, 2025.

6) On integration of the defense industrial base, see, for example, Ondrej Ditrych and Tomas Kucera, “Defence Cooperation and Change: How Defence Industry Integration Fostered Development of the European Security Community,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 58, no. 1 (2023): 129–152; Keith Hartley, “European Defence Policy: Prospects and Challenges,” *Defence and Peace Economics* 35, no. 4 (2024): 504–515.

7) [Australia] Parliament, Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, “Agreement among the Government of Australia, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Government of the United States of America for Cooperation Related to Naval Nuclear Propulsion [Treaty],” August 12, 2024.

Australia is undertaking major upgrades at the Henderson shipyard in Western Australia in anticipation of maintaining and inspecting U.S. and U.K. submarines that will rotate through Australia from 2027. Once completed, the upgrades are expected to strengthen local supply chains in Australia and substantially reduce transport and logistics costs.⁸

Integration of the research environment encompasses joint laboratories, pooled funding, and the exchange of research personnel. On this front, researchers from seven universities across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have formed the Digital Disruption Defence Research Consortium, which conducts research on technological innovations supporting AUKUS activities and assesses their implications.⁹ A RAND Corporation report has likewise recommended that the three countries pool funding to establish a joint research and development center for data sharing and joint development.¹⁰

These cooperative efforts are, of course, currently conducted within the bounds of each country's domestic legal frameworks and therefore fall short of full "integration" in any complete sense. Joint development and joint research on individual projects have long taken place among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. What is distinctive about AUKUS is its aspiration to conduct industrial cooperation not on an ad hoc, project-by-project basis but on a sustained basis through the unification of institutions, markets, and research and development, and, in so doing, build an "ecosystem" for the development, production, and sustainment of military technology and capabilities among the three countries. This is a level of cooperation that even EU member states, which have pursued defense industrial integration for decades, have yet to achieve, and herein lies AUKUS's novelty and distinctiveness.¹¹

8) [Australia] Department of Defence, "Henderson Defence Precinct," n.d. <https://www.defence.gov.au/business-industry/industry-capability-programs/continuous-naval-shipbuilding-sustainment-enterprise/henderson-defence-precinct>.

9) Crispin Savage, "South Australian Researchers Join Forces with Global Defence Consortium," University of Adelaide Newsroom, October 25, 2023 https://www.adelaide.edu.au/newsroom/news/list/2023/10/24/south-australian-researchers-join-forces-with-global-defence-consortium?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

10) Austin Wyatt et al., *Towards AUKUS Collaboration on Responsible Military Artificial Intelligence: Co-Design and Co-Development of AI Among the United States, the UK and Australia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024).

11) On EU efforts toward integration in the defense sector, see Jorge Silva Paulo, "The European Defense Sector and EU Integration," *Connections* 8, no. 1 (2008): 11–57. For recent developments, see Sebastian Clapp, "European Defence Industrial Strategy," Briefing, European Parliament Research Service, September 2024.

(2) Progress under AUKUS

Since the announcement of the “Optimal Pathway” for transferring nuclear-powered submarines to Australia in March 2023, the three countries have made steady preparations, including training and study programs for Australian military and industry personnel at U.S. and U.K. training facilities and at shipyards and nuclear-related sites.¹² Looking ahead to the 2027 rotational deployment of U.S. and U.K. submarines to Australia, the three countries are also working toward joint operations of nuclear-powered submarines, including joint maintenance by Australian, U.K., and U.S. personnel.¹³ Australia has further committed up to USD 3 billion in investment to strengthen the U.S. submarine industrial base, of which USD 1.6 billion has already been transferred to the U.S. side.¹⁴

The second pillar has likewise registered measurable progress in advancing and scaling up maritime autonomous systems, demonstrating and fielding common advanced AI algorithms, and integrating capabilities for launching and recovering underwater vehicles from submarine torpedo tubes. The trilateral exercise “Maritime Big Play,” held in Australia in October 2024, included demonstrations of joint operations of unmanned and autonomous systems in surface and undersea domains, sharing and processing of maritime data, and real-time maritime domain awareness, with Japan participating as an observer (and as a formal participant from 2025).¹⁵ The three countries are also cooperating on the accelerated development of quantum and AI technologies, space-based radar capabilities, cyber capabilities, and long-range precision strikes, including hypersonic missiles.¹⁶

Perhaps the most significant progress in the integration of the defense

12) [Australia] Department of Defence, “AUKUS Defense Ministers Meeting Joint Statement,” December 2, 2023 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2023-12-02/aukus-defense-ministers-meeting-joint-statement>.

13) [U.S.] Department of Defense, “AUKUS Defence Ministers’ Meeting Communique,” September 26, 2024 <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3918402/aukus-defence-ministers-meeting-communique/>.

14) Ben Doherty, “Australia Pays US Another \$800m for AUKUS amid Trump Administration Review of Security Pact,” *Guardian*, July 23, 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/23/australia-payment-us-aukus-trump-administration-review>.

15) [U.S.] Department of Defense, “‘Maritime Big Play’ in Pacific Demonstrates AUKUS Partner Compatibility,” October 24, 2024 <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3945520/maritime-big-play-in-pacific-demonstrates-aukus-partner-compatibility/>.

16) [Australia] Department of Defence, “Accelerated Delivery of AUKUS Pillar II Hypersonic Systems,” November 19, 2024 <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2024-11-19/accelerateddelivery-aukus-pillar-ii-hypersonic-systems>.

industrial base has been the relaxation of U.S. export controls. Strict U.S. export controls in the defense field, particularly the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), have long posed major obstacles to defense technology cooperation between the United States and its allies dating back to the Cold War. Australia and the United Kingdom in particular have pressed for ITAR exemptions and the facilitation of U.S. technology transfer through their 2007 bilateral defense trade treaties with the United States and through their inclusion in the U.S. National Technology and Industrial Base (NTIB) in 2016. Despite this, bureaucratic inertia in the United States, combined with domestic conservative resistance to easing export controls, meant that liberalization had not progressed as the allies had hoped.¹⁷

Against this background, the U.S. Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) granted Australia and the United Kingdom conditional ITAR license exemptions. As a result, in August 2024, the U.S. Department of State amended ITAR to ease export control requirements for defense-related products to Australia and the United Kingdom beginning the following month.¹⁸ Earlier, in April 2024, the Bureau of Industry and Security of the Department of Commerce, which administers export controls on dual-use items, had also significantly relaxed licensing requirements for Australia and the United Kingdom.¹⁹ At long last, Australia and the United Kingdom would be subject to similar treatment to that afforded to Canada. In May 2024, as part of efforts to create a license-free environment among the three countries, Australia's Department of Defence announced the elimination of export permit requirements for roughly 900 cases per year (valued at approximately AUD 5 billion) for Australian exports to the United States and United Kingdom, and for roughly 200 cases per year (valued at over AUD 129 million) for U.K. defense exports to Australia.²⁰

17) Tom Corben and William Greenwalt, "Breaking the Barriers: Reforming US Export Controls to Realise the Potential of AUKUS," United States Studies Centre, May 17, 2023 <https://www.usssc.edu.au/breaking-the-barriers-reforming-us-export-controls-to-realise-the-potential-of-aukus>.

18) [U.S.] Department of State, "International Traffic in Arms Regulations: Exemption for Defense Trade and Cooperation Among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States," *Federal Register* 89, no. 161, August 20, 2024.

19) [U.S.] Department of Commerce, "Export Control Revisions for Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership," *Federal Register* 89, no. 77, April 2024.

20) [Australia] Department of Defence, "AUKUS Countries Export Licence-Free Environment Takes Flight," May 1, 2024 <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2024-05-01/aukus-countries-export-licence-free-environment-takes-flight>.

The announcement also confirmed that, following the aforementioned NDAA amendment, license-free trade had become possible for over 70% of ITAR-controlled defense exports from the United States to Australia, and for over 80% of defense transactions covered by the Export Administration Regulations.²¹

The United Kingdom and Australia have also revised their domestic legislation in step with these U.S. measures. In August 2024, the United Kingdom formally issued the Open General Licence (AUKUS Nations), easing licensing requirements for the export and transfer of technology, equipment, and defense services to Australia and the United States.²² As a result, defense exports of up to approximately GBP 500 million annually no longer require licenses.²³ Australia, for its part, brought its amended Defence Trade Controls Act into force in September 2024, exempting most military goods, dual-use items, and technologies transferred among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States from the requirement to obtain export permits, subject to certain conditions.

In sum, since 2023, AUKUS has made significant progress in relation to both the first and second pillars. Beyond strengthening the three countries' capabilities, AUKUS has promoted the easing of regulations and domestic legal reforms, thereby facilitating smoother defense industrial cooperation and integration. The ITAR exemptions, long sought after by Australia and the United Kingdom, are arguably the most significant achievement under AUKUS for the two countries to date. With these reforms, AUKUS has moved one step closer to the establishment of a "defense free trade zone" among the three countries.

(3) Challenges and Future Prospects for AUKUS

Despite this substantial progress in the integration of the defense industrial base and AUKUS more broadly, many challenges remain. With respect to the first pillar, these include developing the engineers and skilled workforce required for submarine construction and maintenance in Australia, addressing rising costs, and, above all, strengthening U.S. submarine

21) Ibid.

22) [U.K.] Government, "Open General Licence (AUKUS Nations)," August 16, 2024 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-general-licence-aukus-nations>.

23) [U.K.] Government, "Historic Breakthrough in Defence Trade between AUKUS Partners," August 15, 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/historic-breakthrough-in-defence-trade-between-aukus-partners?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

production capacity.²⁴ Critics hoping to see short-term results have pointed to underfunding and a lack of concrete deliverables in the second pillar.²⁵ As noted above, while progress is being made on concrete collaborative projects in several advanced technology fields, none has yet reached the operational stage. Some experts have proposed narrowing the second pillar's focus to three areas: autonomous weapons, long-range strikes, and integrated air defense.²⁶

Issues related to export controls also remain a core AUKUS challenge. As noted above, while approximately 70% of U.S. exports have been exempted from ITAR in support of a license-free environment, the remaining 30% fall on the Excluded Technologies List (ETL) and are not eligible for ITAR exemption. The ETL reportedly includes items essential to the development of advanced capabilities under the second pillar, including AI, quantum technology, and missile-related technology, as well as submarine technology, which therefore continues to impose serious constraints on the three countries' joint development plans.²⁷

One reason that fundamental ITAR reform has not advanced is what has been described as a U.S. "superpower mindset," whereby the transfer of technology is seen as occurring one-way—from the United States, not to it.²⁸ ITAR rests on the premise that the United States holds an absolute advantage across all fields of military technology. During the Cold War in particular, U.S. allies were viewed as being unable to prevent the illicit transfer of technologies to the Soviet Union and as failing to halt the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and other advanced conventional weapons.²⁹ In this context, the notion that allies might possess technology superior to that of

24) Satake Tomohiko, "'Moroha no tsurugi' to shite no AUKUS: Goshu no genshiryoku sensuikan shutoku ni muketa kadai (zenpen, kohen)" [AUKUS as a "Double-Edged Sword": Challenges Facing Australia's Nuclear Submarine Acquisition (parts 1 and 2)], *International Information Network Analysis*, March 14, 2024.

25) Peter Dean and Alice Nason, "AUKUS Pillar II Is Failing in Its Mission," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2025 <https://warontherocks.com/2025/06/aukus-pillar-ii-is-failing-in-its-mission-it-needs-its-own-optimal-pathway/>.

26) Abraham M. Denmark and Charles Edel, "The AUKUS Inflection: Seizing the Opportunity to Deliver Deterrence," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 25, 2025 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/aukus-inflection-seizing-opportunity-deliver-deterrence>.

27) William Greenwalt and Tom Corben, "AUKUS Enablers? Assessing Defence Trade Control Reforms in Australia and the United States," United States Studies Centre, August 21, 2024 <https://www.usc.edu.au/aukus-assessing-defence-trade-control-reforms-in-australia-and-the-united-states>.

28) Ibid.

29) Corben and Greenwalt, "Breaking the Barriers."

the United States, and that cooperation might therefore serve U.S. interests, simply did not exist.³⁰

Some allied voices argue that changing this American “superpower mindset” is the key to fundamental ITAR reform.³¹ On the other hand, the United States continues to lead the world in many advanced military technology fields, and the gap with Australia in particular remains stark in terms of defense industrial scale and research and development spending. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the gross value added of Australia’s defense industry in fiscal year 2023–2024 was AUD 1.19 billion, or approximately 0.47% of the Australian economy as a whole.³² U.S. research and development expenditure for fiscal year 2024 was approximately USD 194.6 billion, whereas Australia’s was approximately USD 9.7 billion, roughly one-twentieth of the U.S. figure.³³ Despite some genuinely impressive Australian technologies in areas such as AI, the overall U.S.-Australia technology gap is unmistakable.

From the U.S. perspective, the purpose of NTIB and AUKUS alike is to secure U.S. military technological superiority; technology transfer to allies is a secondary concern. From this standpoint, U.S. caution about easing export controls is unsurprising in the absence of comparable or commensurate technological benefits from allies. The June 2025 announcement by the U.S. Department of Defense (now the Department of War) of an AUKUS “review” reflected precisely these concerns. Under Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby, who led the review, had voiced support for AUKUS’s importance before joining the administration but had also insisted on prioritizing the U.S. submarine production line above all.³⁴ In July, it was reported that Under Secretary Colby demanded that Australia and Japan

30) Tsuruoka Michito, “AUKUS ga ‘famiri bijinesu’ de aru riyu” [Why AUKUS is a “family business”], *Foresight*, May 30, 2024 <https://www.fsight.jp/articles/-/50620>.

31) Corben and Greenwalt, “Breaking the Barriers.”

32) [Australia] Bureau of Statistics, “Australian Defence Industry Grows by 12.4%,” April 16, 2025 <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/australian-defence-industry-grows-124>.

33) [Australia] Department of Industry, Science and Resources, “What Can the 2025-26 SRI Budget Tables Tell Us about Australian Government Investments in Science, Research and Innovation?” August 15, 2025 <https://www.industry.gov.au/news/what-can-2025-26-sri-budget-tables-tell-us-about-australian-government-investments-science-research-and-innovation>.

34) Adam Creighton, “Donald Trump’s Top Defence Advisers Warn against Selling Nuclear Subs to Australia,” *Weekend Australian*, January 1, 2024 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/one-of-donald-trumps-top-defence-advisers-warns-against-selling-nuclear-subs-to-australia/news-story/bbddd3dbbd24264529180a1d290f9c3f>.

make clear what roles they would play in a Taiwan contingency.³⁵

Of course, given the strategic benefits AUKUS offers not only to Australia and the United Kingdom but also to the United States, a U.S. withdrawal from the partnership is highly unlikely.³⁶ At the first in-person U.S.-Australia summit in October 2025, President Trump strongly endorsed AUKUS, suggesting that AUKUS would continue after the review, including the transfer of Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines.³⁷ In early December, the U.S. Department of War announced that the AUKUS review had concluded and that the results had been delivered to Australia.³⁸ While the review's results were not made public, the subsequent Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations confirmed President Trump's stated intent that AUKUS proceed at "full steam ahead."³⁹ AUKUS thus "survived" the Trump administration's review.

This does not mean that the many challenges surrounding AUKUS have been resolved. Strengthening U.S. submarine construction capacity is essential for delivering Virginia-class submarines to Australia in the 2030s, yet despite investment from both the U.S. and Australian governments, no significant improvement has been observed.⁴⁰ The U.S. side will likely continue to press Australia for greater burden-sharing, including additional financing for AUKUS. The U.S. announcement following the June U.S.-Australia summit confirmed that Australia had agreed to strengthen alliance burden-sharing and would make new defense investments to bolster the

35) "US Demands to Know What Allies Would Do in Event of War over Taiwan," *Financial Times*, July 13, 2025 <https://www.ft.com/content/41e272e4-5b25-47ee-807c-2b57c1316fe4>.

36) Satake Tomohiko, "Toranpu seiken ni yoru AUKUS no saikento to sono tenbo" [The Trump Administration's Review of AUKUS and Its Prospects], *International Information Network Analysis*, August 5, 2025.

37) Josh Butler, "Albanese at the White House: Trump Endorses AUKUS, Signs \$8.5 bn Rare-Earths Deal and Calls PM 'Great Leader,'" *Guardian*, October 20, 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/oct/20/albanese-at-the-white-house-trump-endorses-aukus-signs-85bn-rare-earths-deal-and-calls-pm-great-leader>.

38) Moriyasu Ken, "AUKUS Review Concludes, with US Saying 'Full Steam Ahead,'" *Nikkei Asia*, December 5, 2025.

39) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Fact Sheet on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2025," December 8, 2025 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/joint-fact-sheet-australia-us-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2025>.

40) Satake, "Toranpu seiken ni yoru AUKUS no saikento to sono tenbo."

U.S.-Australia alliance.⁴¹ The new National Security Strategy released by the White House in December also calls for Australia, alongside Taiwan, to increase defense spending.⁴²

Over the longer term, even if there is continued progress under AUKUS and deeper integration of the defense industrial base and operations, Australia's autonomy may be increasingly constrained. If, for instance, the "Optimal Pathway" of the first pillar proceeds smoothly, by the mid-2030s, as many as 440 Australians are expected to be embarked on 25 U.S. attack submarines (SSNs), constituting fully 12% of total crews.⁴³ When Virginia-class SSNs are transferred to Australia, those submarines may also assume intelligence-gathering and other roles previously performed by U.S. SSNs.⁴⁴ In such circumstances, it would be effectively impossible for Australian forces to independently disengage in the event of a U.S.-China contingency. Whatever Australia may feel about this point, AUKUS will continue to integrate it further into U.S. military operational planning.

This poses no significant problem so long as U.S. and Australian strategic objectives are aligned and the United States remains a reliable ally, as has been the case to date. Still, under "America First," even alliance policy and China policy may be subject to "deal-making."⁴⁵ Australia can no longer rely on the alliance with absolute certainty, as it once did. There is also a non-trivial possibility that domestic political turmoil in the United States could disrupt aid or supply chains to Australia, or that agreements could be abruptly abandoned at the president's discretion. In such an event, it is Australia, not the United States, that would suffer the most. AUKUS does indeed hold promise as a potential "game changer" in competition with China, but for Australia, it is also a "double-edged sword" carrying considerable risk.

41) [U.S.] White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Closes Billion-Dollar Deals with Australia," October 20, 2025 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/10/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-closes-billion-dollar-deals-with-australia/>.

42) [U.S.] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, 24.

43) Michael Shoebridge, "'Extreme Risk' of AUKUS Deal to US Motivates Colby," *Australian*, July 26, 2025 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/extreme-risk-of-aucus-deal-to-usmotivates-colby/news-story/1b73e1e4df4e223bfa8b30ea9dd3d4d>.

44) Mike Keating and Jon Stanford, "Ditch AUKUS Pillar One. It Involves Australia Too Much in US Strategy," *Strategist*, August 22, 2025 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/ditch-aucus-pillar-oneit-involves-australia-too-much-in-us-strategy/>.

45) Mori Satoru, "Dai-niji Toranpu seiken no anzen hoshō seisaku no inpurikeshon (1)" [Implications of the Second Trump Administration's Security Policy (1)], *Research Report*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 31, 2025 <https://www.jiia.or.jp/research-report/security-fy2024-05.html>.

2. Competitive Pluralization in the Economic Domain: Economic Security

(1) Australia and Economic Security

Compared with Japan, Australia's interest in economic security has, until recently, been comparatively limited. Australia has neither legislation analogous to Japan's Economic Security Promotion Act nor a clearly designated lead ministry for economic security (as of October 2025). Australia's business community, which is highly dependent on the Chinese market, has also been described as slow to connect economic risk and geopolitical risk.⁴⁶ Australia has traditionally championed "middle power internationalism," emphasized free trade and the market economy, and sought to uphold the "rules-based order." From this position, the Australian government had long maintained a cautious stance on domestic market intervention and on the exercise of "economic statecraft," that is, the use of economic instruments as a means of security policy or statecraft.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, China's rapid rise underwritten by "state capitalism," its "weaponization of interdependence" to coerce other countries economically, and the intensification of the U.S.-China trade war from the late 2010s have forced Australia to recognize the linkage between economics and security. The spread of COVID-19 in the early 2020s and China's subsequent economic coercion of Australia pushed economic security to the forefront of Australian policy. China responded to the Morrison administration's call for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 with a rapid succession of economic sanctions, including suspensions of imports from Australia and travel advisories warning Chinese tourists against visiting the country. China also imposed diplomatic measures, including the detention of Australian journalists and the suspension of high-level government visits. Australia pushed back against these measures, and Australian public sentiment toward China fell to its lowest level since the normalization of

46) Hayley Channer and Georgia Edmonstone, "What Does 'Economic Security' Mean to Australia in 2024?" United States Studies Centre, January 30, 2024 <https://www.ussc.edu.au/what-does-economic-security-mean-to-australia-in-2024>.

47) Victor A. Ferguson, Darren J. Lim, and Benjamin Herscovitch, "Between Market and State: The Evolution of Australia's Economic Statecraft," *Pacific Review* 36, no. 5 (2023): 1148–1180 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2200026>.

diplomatic relations in 1972.⁴⁸

In the end, China's economic coercion did not cause significant damage to the Australian economy. The agricultural, forestry, and livestock products that China halted accounted for only a small percentage of Australia's total exports, and as discussed below, Australia made up much of the lost ground through trade diversification.⁴⁹ Nor was China able to halt imports of iron ore, which constitute the bulk of Australian exports to China. Ultimately, China abandoned this largely ineffective sanctions regime against Australia and moved to repair relations, including economic ones. The downturn in China's real estate market and the broader slowdown in Chinese economic growth likely contributed to this shift. As a result, Australia-China relations were normalized, both politically and economically.

Even so, China's sanctions strongly impressed upon the Australian public not only the risks of dependence on China but also Australia's vulnerability within the open international economic system. With a relatively weak domestic industrial base and a small market, and consequently heavy reliance on resource exports for national revenue, Australia is more exposed than other advanced economies to global economic fluctuations. The high-tariff measures imposed by the second Trump administration also suggested that Australia's pursuit of market principles alone could no longer guarantee its national prosperity and security. As a result, economic security, as a means of navigating great-power rivalry, has rapidly moved up the agenda in Australia as well.

(2) Australia's Economic Security Policies

The first item on the Australian government's economic security agenda is the diversification of regional trade relations.⁵⁰ As noted above, in response to Chinese economic coercion, Australia has sought to diversify its trading relationships across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East to

48) Ryan Neelam, "2025 Report: Relations in the Indo-Pacific," Lowy Institute, June 16, 2025 <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/report/2025/relations-in-the-indo-pacific/#report>.

49) Satake Tomohiko, "Go-Chu kankei no 'shin-jotai': Kankei kaizen ni muketa ugoki to kongo no mitoshi" [The "New Normal" in Australia-China Relations: Movements Toward Improved Relations and the Outlook Ahead], *CISTEC Journal*, July 2024, 42.

50) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Trading Our Way to Greater Prosperity and Security," (Speech by Don Farrell, Minister for Trade and Tourism), November 14, 2022 <https://www.trademinister.gov.au/minister/don-farrell/speech/trading-our-way-greater-prosperity-and-security>.

reduce dependence on China. This effort yielded comprehensive economic partnership agreements or equivalent arrangements with the United Kingdom in December 2021, with India in April 2022, and with the United Arab Emirates in November 2024. Australia has also accelerated negotiations toward a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union. In 2023, Australia published the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy, underscoring Southeast Asia's importance as a target for trade diversification.⁵¹

In particular, the cultivation of new markets has been urgently needed for the agricultural, forestry, and livestock products targeted by China. The Australian government reportedly secured market access for 46 different agricultural and fisheries products in new export markets.⁵² As a result, China's share of Australian exports declined from 42.1% in 2021 to 29.5% in 2022. By contrast, exports to Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, and ASEAN countries rose. Similarly, for Australian coal, where China had been the principal buyer, exports to the EU rose from a 3.0% share to 4.1%.⁵³ During the same period, exports of wheat and cotton to ASEAN countries reached record highs and surpassed exports to China.⁵⁴ Australia was thus able to minimize the disruption caused by China's trade sanctions. (See Figure 1.)

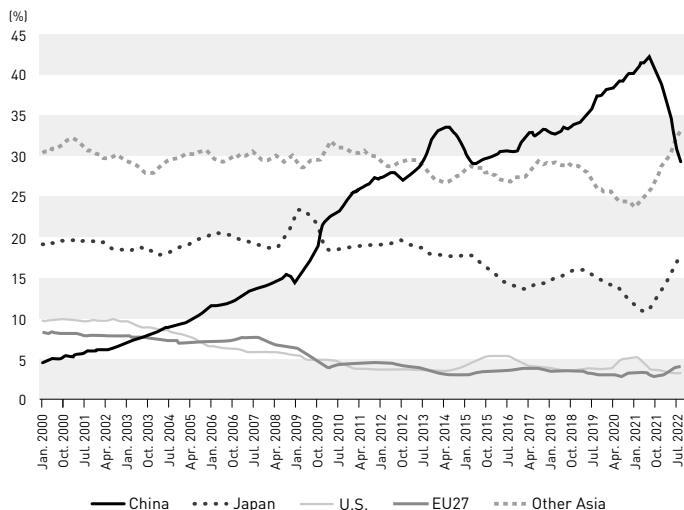
51) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*, September 2023 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/invested-southeast-asia-economic-strategy-2040.pdf>.

52) Ferguson, Lim, and Herscovitch, "Between Market and State."

53) David Uren, "Australia's Trade Diversification Away from China Picks Up Pace," *The Strategist*, October 13, 2022 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-trade-diversification-away-fromchina-picks-up-pace/>.

54) [Australia] Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, "Agricultural Export Markets Continue to Diversify," August 2022 <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/august-2022-agricultural-export-markets-continue-diversify.pdf>.

Figure 1. Australia's Export Destinations and Shares (2000–2022)



(Source) David Uren, "Australia's Trade Diversification Away from China Picks Up Pace," *The Strategist*, October 13, 2022 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-trade-diversification-away-from-china-picks-up-pace/>.

Second is supply chain resilience. In 2021, the Office of Supply Chain Resilience was established within the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR), undertaking analysis and measures to reduce supply chain risk.⁵⁵ Australia has placed particular emphasis on strengthening supply chains for critical minerals, including the extraction and processing of rare earths, and has provided production tax credits and funding for these purposes.⁵⁶ To meet its target of supplying 82% of electricity from renewables by 2030, the Australian government has also developed a National Renewable Energy Supply Chain Action Plan in coordination with state and territory governments. The government has invested an additional AUD 14.3 million to support this initiative. It is also developing international rules to counter unfair trade practices and negotiating international benchmarks for trade in high-quality critical minerals.⁵⁷

55) [Australia] Department of Industry, Science and Resources, "Office of Supply Chain Resilience," n.d. <https://www.industry.gov.au/trade/office-supply-chain-resilience>.

56) [Australia] Prime Minister, "Investing in a Future Made in Australia," May 14, 2024 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/investing-future-made-australia>.

57) Ibid.

A strong domestic industry is essential to supply chain resilience. Australia's manufacturing sector had long been in decline owing to the country's export-oriented economy. To rebuild it, in September 2023, the Australian government established the National Reconstruction Fund and announced enhanced investment measures for domestic industries, including the defense industry.⁵⁸ Renewable energy and low-emission technologies, medical science, transport, and defense capabilities were designated as priority areas for focused budget allocation.⁵⁹ In May 2024, the government also announced the Future Made in Australia (FMA) initiative, which involved ramping up efforts to attract and promote investment in domestic industry, add value to natural resources, strengthen economic security, and bolster innovation. In November of the same year, Parliament passed legislation institutionalizing FMA (the FMA Act), enhancing government support under both a "national interest stream" for safeguarding sovereign capability and a "net zero transformation stream" for decarbonization.⁶⁰

As noted above, the transition to net zero and clean energy is an important element in Australia's efforts to enhance economic security and strengthen manufacturing. Australia has prioritized the use of resources such as green metals, hydrogen energy, low-carbon liquid fuels, and solar energy, and is expanding their production and export. Drawing on its abundant and low-cost renewable energy, ready access to capital markets, low country risk, and, above all, its geographic location in the rapidly growing Indo-Pacific region, Australia is developing industries with long-term comparative advantages that will play central roles in domestic and international decarbonization supply chains.⁶¹

Japan is an important partner supporting these Australian efforts. In October 2023, an unprecedented joint meeting was held among the four Japanese and Australian ministers responsible for trade, energy security, energy transition, and addressing climate change. The four ministers

58) Channer and Edmonstone, "What Does 'Economic Security' Mean to Australia in 2024?"

59) [Australia] Department of Finance, "National Reconstruction Fund Corporation," February 13, 2025 <https://www.finance.gov.au/government/specialist-investment-vehicles/national-reconstruction-fund-corporation>.

60) [Australia] Department of Industry, Science and Resources, "Future Made in Australia Legislation Passes the Senate," November 28, 2024 <https://www.minister.industry.gov.au/ministers/husic/media-releases/future-made-australia-legislation-passes-senate>.

61) Steven Kennedy (Secretary to the Treasury), "Address to the United States Studies Centre: Economic Policy in a Changing World," June 19, 2024 <https://www.treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/drkenedy-ussc-545180.pdf>.

agreed to ensure stable energy supply, promote decarbonization and energy transition, and achieve net zero, while addressing common opportunities and challenges. They also confirmed cooperation on building a robust economic architecture, diversifying trade, and strengthening supply chain resilience.⁶² Japan is cooperating with Australia in financial areas as well, through Japan Australia Rare Earths Pty Ltd, which was jointly established in 2011 by the Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation and Sojitz Corporation and has invested in the Australian rare earths company Lynas.

As part of its economic security agenda, Australia is also advancing the development of emerging technologies such as AI, quantum technology, autonomous systems, and biotechnology. Australia recognizes that the development of advanced technologies and the transition to a digital economy are essential not only for sustained economic growth and the promotion of clean energy but also for strengthening its capabilities and addressing challenges in the security domain, including AUKUS.⁶³ Australia is therefore promoting research and development in partnership with industry and universities, centered on DISR and its Critical Technologies Hub, as well as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), which falls under the DISR umbrella. CSIRO hosts more than 3,000 researchers from Australia and around the world. In the field of emerging technology development, it is regarded as one of the world's leading institutions in robotics and autonomous systems.⁶⁴

In addition, Australia has strengthened efforts to protect critical technologies and critical infrastructure. In November 2023, the Defence Trade Controls Amendment Bill was introduced in Parliament, including measures to enhance the protection of Australia's most advanced military technologies. The bill provides country-based exemptions for the United States and the United Kingdom for trade in defense items and technologies. At the same time, it requires Australian producers of military or dual-use

62) [Japan] Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, "Australia-Japan Ministerial Economic Dialogue Joint Ministerial Statement," October 8, 2023 <https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2023/10/20231008001/20231008001-arr.pdf>.

63) [Australia] Department of Industry, Science and Resources, "Critical Technologies Statement," May 19, 2023 <https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/critical-technologies-statement>.

64) [Australia] Department of Industry, Science and Resources, "Australia's Robotics Opportunity," n.d. <https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/national-robotics-strategy/australias-robotics-opportunity#:~:text=CSIRO's%20Robotics%20and%20Autonomous%20Systems,Research%20Projects%20Agency's%20Subterranean%20Challenge%20>.

technologies to seek case-by-case exemptions when employing workers from certain countries, such as China and India. For universities engaged in research with potential military applications, the bill imposes new restrictions on partnering with foreign scientists. It also requires firms to obtain licenses when transferring controlled military or dual-use technologies to countries other than the United States and the United Kingdom.

Australia has also excluded the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei from its 5G network bidding, removed Chinese-made CCTV cameras from government facilities, and banned the Chinese-developed app TikTok from government devices.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Australia is developing new laws and frameworks to monitor and regulate foreign investment.⁶⁶ This strategy of strengthening protection of critical technologies and infrastructure within targeted fields while maintaining openness to the international economy is sometimes called a “small yard, high fence” strategy.⁶⁷ Ensuring thorough safeguards for telecommunications, energy networks, ports, and other critical infrastructure, alongside core technologies fundamental to state functions such as AI, quantum technology, and semiconductors, has become the central challenge of Australian economic security.

(3) Challenges for Australia's Economic Security Policies

While Australia's economic security policies may appear at first glance to be progressing steadily, many challenges remain. First, with respect to trade diversification, the gradual easing of Chinese sanctions alongside the improvement of Australia-China relations since 2022 has seen Australian exports to China recover to pre-sanction levels. Indeed, in the first half of 2023, exports to China reached an all-time high, driven by increased lithium exports, and they have continued to trend upward. By contrast, the shares of exports to Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan have declined again. (See Figure 2.) In fiscal year 2023–2024, China's share of Australian exports reached 41%, far exceeding Japan (16%), the Republic of Korea (7%),

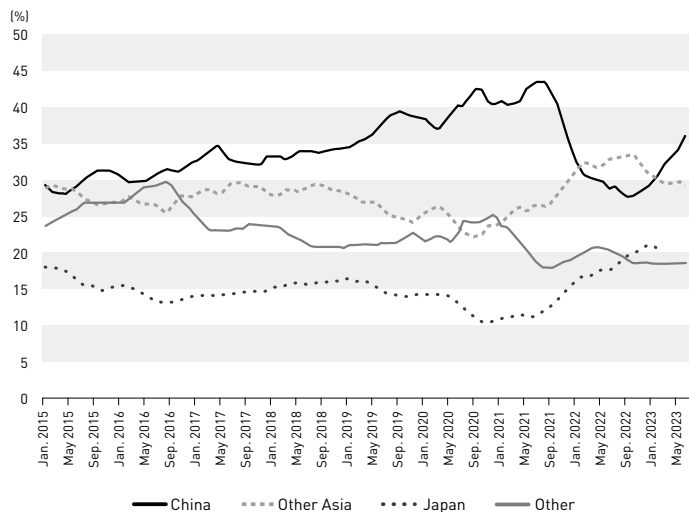
65) Hayley Channer, Georgia Edmonstone, and Tom Barrett, “Australia's Economic Security Outlook: Expert Perspectives on Challenges Facing Australia in 2025,” United States Studies Centre, January 30, 2025 <https://www.ussc.edu.au/australias-economic-security-outlook-expert-perspectives-on-challenges-facing-australia-in-2025>.

66) [Australia] Treasury, “Australia's Foreign Investment Framework,” March 14, 2025 <https://www.foreigninvestment.gov.au/investing-in-australia/foreign-investment-framework>.

67) Kennedy, “Address to the United States Studies Centre: Economic Policy in a Changing World.”

and India and Taiwan (4% each).⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the share of imports from China remains substantial as well. The fundamental reality that Australia’s resource-heavy economy “depends on China” remains largely unchanged.

Figure 2. Australia’s Export Destinations and Shares (2015–2023)



(Source) David Uren, “Despite It All, China Dominates Australian Trade—Again,” *The Strategist*, July 3, 2025<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/despite-it-all-china-dominates-australian-trade-again/>.

Second, Australia faces shortages of capital and labor. Strengthening domestic industry, mining critical minerals, and transitioning to net zero require substantial funding and a large workforce, but high upfront investment burdens, market uncertainty, price volatility, and the risk of government market intervention often deter private firms from entering these sectors.⁶⁹ Paradoxically, this has resulted in continued reliance on Chinese capital for some of these projects. The government has sought to mitigate this through tax incentives and partial cost subsidies, but it has struggled to attract new

68) David Uren, “Despite It All, China Dominates Australian Trade—Again,” *The Strategist*, July 3, 2025 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/despite-it-all-china-dominates-australian-trade-again/>.

69) [Australia] Treasury, *Future Made in Australia: National Interest Framework: Supporting Paper*, May 14, 2024 <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/p2024-526942-fmia-nif.pdf>.

buyers through such measures alone.⁷⁰ Australia also faces a chronic shortage of skilled labor, for which it has yet to find an effective remedy.⁷¹

Australia's efforts to revive its domestic industry are not new; it has made several similar attempts in the past, none of which yielded sustained success. With a relatively small domestic market, Australia needs exports to achieve economies of scale, yet its geographic remoteness imposes substantial transport costs.⁷² By one measure, hourly value added in manufacturing (labor productivity) is approximately 11% below the average for all industries, well below sectors such as mining, financial services, utilities, and information and communications. As a result, some analysts argue that strengthening manufacturing, without shifting capital and labor from less productive sectors, would simply put pressure on other sectors.⁷³ Australia's labor costs are also among the highest in the world, and complex regulations and high compliance requirements further erode its competitiveness.⁷⁴

Third, Australia's clean energy transition faces numerous challenges. Chinese firms hold the lead in batteries, solar panels, and many other green technology fields in terms of experience, efficiency, and cost competitiveness. Therefore, to achieve zero emissions, Australia has little choice but to rely on Chinese technology. For example, 80% of the wind turbines Australia has imported for energy transition and 80% of the electric vehicles (EVs) sold in Australia are Chinese-made.⁷⁵ Australia signed an FTA with China in 2015 and has shown no inclination to follow the United States or European countries in imposing tariffs on Chinese EVs. Australia's clean energy transition has

70) Tom Lowrey, "Future Made in Australia: What We Know about the Government's Flagship Budget Policy," ABC News, May 16, 2024 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-16/what-is-the-government-future-made-in-australia-plan/103852302>.

71) Andrew McKellar, "Diversification Needed for Trade," *Australian*, October 17, 2023 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/diversification-needed-for-trade/news-story/ae43db7b196f812470f3aec3f40642cc>.

72) Satyajit Das, "Industrial Policy Won't Bring About a Future Made in Australia," *Nikkei Asia*, April 23, 2024 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Industrial-policy-won-t-bring-about-a-Future-Made-in-Australia>.

73) Tom Dusevic and Patrick Commins, "Future Made in Australia: Productivity Commission's Danielle Wood Reveals Hidden Cost of Anthony Albanese's Future," *Australian*, April 11, 2024 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/future-made-in-australia-productivity-commissions-danielle-wood-reveals-hidden-cost-of-anthony-albaneses-future/news-story/690e34b972e07355d92728ad7e569112>.

74) Das, "Industrial Policy Won't Bring About a Future Made in Australia."

75) John Kehoe, "China's EVs Good for Aussie Drivers, Bad for Global Trade War," *Australian Financial Review*, August 28, 2024 <https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/china-s-evs-good-for-aussie-drivers-but-risk-global-trade-war-20240827-p5k5ni>.

therefore deepened, rather than diminished, its dependence on China.

Finally, there is the “Trump factor.” After Chinese trade sanctions were lifted, Australia had to deal with the Trump administration’s tariff measures. Since April 2025, all Australian exports to the United States have been subject to a new uniform 10% tariff, and in June, an additional 50% tariff was imposed on steel and aluminum. There is also speculation that pharmaceuticals, a major Australian export, could face a 200% tariff, with copper subject to a 50% tariff.⁷⁶ The U.S. share of Australia’s total exports is less than 5%, so the direct economic impact of the tariffs is more limited than for other major economies. Even so, if U.S. trade actions affect the global economy, particularly the Chinese economy, Australia will inevitably feel the ripple effects.

Against this backdrop, the October 2025 U.S.-Australia summit produced an agreement on a U.S.-Australia Framework for Securing of Supply in the Mining and Processing of Critical Minerals and Rare Earths, which includes joint U.S.-Australian investment in a critical minerals project pipeline totaling USD 8.5 billion.⁷⁷ While the supply chains for Australian critical minerals are currently dependent on China for refining and processing, this framework aims to place control back in U.S.-Australian hands and is potentially a “game changer” among Australia’s economic security policies.

At the same time, if U.S.-China relations were to deteriorate further over trade and geopolitical competition, the Trump administration could apply pressure on Australia over its trade with China. President Barack Obama once asked Prime Minister Tony Abbott to halt iron ore exports to China, much to the surprise of the Australian side.⁷⁸ Should U.S.-China tariff negotiations break down, there is no guarantee that the United States would not apply such pressure on Australia again. While Australia seeks to “decouple from China” on economic security grounds, the practical obstacles remain substantial. Structurally, Australia continues, for the most part, to be “caught between” the U.S.-China rivalry. If anything, the advent of the second Trump administration has deepened Australia’s dilemma.

76) Bonnie Li, Natalie Hui, and Robin Zhang, “Tariffs, Tensions, and Trade: What’s Next for the Australian Economy?” UNIT, July 27, 2025 <https://www.unit.org.au/unit-scroll/tariffs-tensions-and-trade-whats-next-for-the-australian-economy>.

77) [Australia] Prime Minister, “Historic Critical Minerals Framework Signed by President Trump and Prime Minister Albanese,” October 21, 2025 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/historic-critical-minerals-framework-signed-president-trump-and-prime-minister-albanese>.

78) Joe Hockey and Leo Shanahan, *Diplomatic: A Washington Memoir*, Kindle Edition (HarperCollins, 2022), loc. 3973.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined AUKUS as a response to competitive pluralization in the military domain, and Australia's economic security policies as a response to competitive pluralization in the economic domain, addressing the substance and challenges of each. With respect to AUKUS, this examination showed that Australia, through the integration of the defense industrial base with the United States and the United Kingdom, is pursuing an integrated trilateral response to China's rapidly expanding capabilities, particularly in emerging technology fields. As for economic security, it illustrated how Australia is strengthening its response to Chinese economic coercion, interference, and espionage through supply chain resilience, the strengthening of domestic industry, and the protection of critical technologies and critical infrastructure. It also highlighted the growing importance of cooperation with partner countries, including Japan, in areas such as trade diversification and critical minerals production.

Domain	Case	Issues	Means	Partnerships
Military	AUKUS	Nuclear-powered submarines, emerging technologies (AI, quantum technology, cyber, hypersonics, etc.)	Development, production, and innovation through defense industrial base integration	United States, United Kingdom (and Japan)
Economic	Economic security	Trade and supply chains, critical resources and infrastructure, climate change, and others	Diversification of trade and supply chains, protection of critical resources and infrastructure, cooperation with foreign partners	United States, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, the Middle East, and European countries (especially the United Kingdom and the EU)

To prevail in competitive pluralization across the military and economic domains, Australia is thus seeking to strengthen its military capabilities across diverse fields and to bolster security through economic means. In this endeavor, Australia is drawing on cooperation not only with the United States, its traditional ally, but also with partner countries including Japan and the United Kingdom. The domains, means, and partner countries of competition have indeed pluralized, but their principal aim is deterring China, reducing dependence on China, and securing strategic advantage through these efforts. In this sense, although the substance of the competition is “pluralizing,” its purposes are converging. While not addressed in this chapter, a similar tendency can be observed in Australia's engagement with

the Pacific Island countries.⁷⁹

This chapter has also identified the challenges and problems for these policies. As regards AUKUS, the outlook for U.S. submarine transfers remains uncertain, and U.S. export controls and other obstacles have hindered the full integration of the defense industrial base among the three countries. As for economic security, despite trade diversification and the strengthening of domestic industry, Australia continues to depend heavily on China for exports and for its clean energy transition. With its relatively small domestic market, Australia also faces shortages of capital and labor.

The advent of the second Trump administration has further complicated Australian strategic calculus for standing strong against China amid competitive pluralization. With respect to AUKUS, U.S. demands for burden-sharing under “America First” are likely to intensify, further eroding Australian autonomy. With respect to economic security, beyond having to deal with U.S. tariffs, Australia may also face growing U.S. pressure for further decoupling (or de-risking) from the Chinese economy, depending on the trajectory of U.S.-China rivalry. Such pressure, as Australia struggles to reduce its dependence on China, would put the country in an even more difficult position. Australia must also prepare for unforeseen contingencies, including the possibility that the Trump administration may strike some form of “deal” with China over regional security.

Under such circumstances, Australia is likely to continue pluralizing its partnerships by further strengthening relations with countries other than the United States, while maintaining existing frameworks such as the U.S.-Australia alliance and AUKUS. This pluralization of partnerships will be important not only for reducing Australia’s economic dependence on China but also for balancing its excessive security dependence on the United States. Cooperation with U.S. allies will, through the sharing of the defense burden in deterring China, help ease U.S. pressure for greater Australian defense spending as well. Australia will also seek to engage China with the aim of maintaining stable relations, even as it works to reduce its economic dependence on China. These dynamics are not unique to Australia; they apply, to varying degrees, to other regional states beyond the United States and China, including Japan. As a result, the competitive pluralization in the Indo-Pacific region is likely to accelerate further in the years ahead.

79) See Satake Tomohiko, “Goshu no Taiheiyo toshokoku seisaku to sono kadai” [Australia’s policy toward the Pacific Island countries and its challenges], *Kokusai Anzenhosho* [Journal of International Security], March 2026.



The Pluralization and Diversification of Security Cooperation

Variations of Hedging among Southeast Asian States

SHOJI Tomotaka

Chapter 6

Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines Defense Ministers' Meeting (Photo: Kyodo News)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

ASEAN was founded during the Cold War with the aim of ensuring regional security, and it pursued neutrality as a means of managing the influence of extra-regional great powers. In the post-Cold War period, ASEAN incorporated major external powers into multilateral cooperation frameworks and established its centrality. As U.S.-China rivalry has intensified, however, the function of institutional hedging has weakened, and Southeast Asian states have responded by pluralizing and diversifying their security cooperation. The Philippines has placed its alliances at the core, while Vietnam and Indonesia have anchored their approaches in non-alignment. Cambodia and Malaysia, for their part, have sought to calibrate their distance from the United States and China. These varied responses reflect not only external factors such as the presence or absence of an alliance, geopolitical considerations, and the historical trajectory of relations with China, but also domestic factors, including leaders' worldviews and public sentiment.

Introduction

Great-power competition centered on U.S.-China rivalry has intensified, drawing states across the world into a contestation that extends beyond the military domain to trade, strategic resources, advanced technology, and a wide range of other fields. The states of Southeast Asia find themselves in the eye of this storm. The region carries multifaceted significance for both the United States and China. Viewed as a whole through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), for example, ASEAN and China are each other's largest trading partners, and their economic relationship is deep and continues to deepen year by year. From a security standpoint, mainland Southeast Asia borders southern China, and the region encompasses sea areas of vital importance to China, including the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca. The United States, for its part, is the largest investor in ASEAN and holds substantial economic interests in the region. Strategically, securing this region, which lies at the junction of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, is indispensable to the operations of U.S. forces, particularly the Navy.

Because the region matters so greatly to both powers, Southeast Asia has become the target of a "scramble for influence." Faced with assertive overtures from both great powers, Southeast Asian states have skillfully avoided being forced into a binary choice between Washington and Beijing, instead pursuing cooperative relations with each: economic cooperation with China, and security cooperation with the United States.

This pattern of compartmentalized, selective cooperation has, however, become increasingly difficult to sustain. As U.S.-China rivalry takes on an increasingly structural character, both sides have intensified their efforts to draw Southeast Asian states into their respective camps, leaving less room for the decoupling of cooperative tracks. As great-power competition has sharpened, the multilateralism-centered regional security system that ASEAN constructed precisely to avoid binary choices has fallen into dysfunction.

The advent of the second Donald Trump administration has further complicated the picture. With the emergence of a United States that downplays multilateralism and presses every state, including small ones, into bilateral deals, the strategic environment surrounding Southeast Asian countries has grown more opaque, and their strategic calculations have become correspondingly more complex. The ideological and regime-based dimensions of great-power competition have faded, while uncertainty and fluidity in the balance of power have grown. The United States, long regarded

as the steward of an international order grounded in liberal values and the rule of law, has under the Trump administration introduced tariff policies that seemingly repudiate the free trade regime, while China, conversely, has positioned itself as a defender of the World Trade Organization (WTO) system. The boundaries of ideology and political values are dissolving. Amid this turbulence, how are the states of Southeast Asia navigating the path to secure their survival and prosperity? This chapter focuses on the pluralization and diversification of security cooperation to examine the survival strategies of Southeast Asian states under conditions of great-power competition.

A useful concept for explaining the behavior of Southeast Asian states amid great-power competition is hedging. Hedging refers to a state's pursuit, under conditions of high uncertainty and risk, of multiple policy options designed to produce mutually offsetting effects, thereby reducing those uncertainties and risks.¹ Much of the existing scholarship that applies the concept of hedging to Southeast Asia has focused on the diversification of external relations, especially with the United States and China, and on how regional states pursue diplomatic balance.² While drawing on the insights refined through this body of work, this chapter directs attention not only to external partners but also to the diversity of forms of cooperation. By treating the pluralization and diversification of Southeast Asian states' security cooperation as variations of hedging, the chapter seeks to develop an integrated understanding of the diversity among these states.

Section 1 traces the historical evolution of Southeast Asian states' behavior in the context of great-power competition, from the establishment of ASEAN during the Cold War to the rise of multilateralism in the post-Cold War period. Section 2 describes how the intensification and structuralization of U.S.-China rivalry has gradually rendered ASEAN's security system dysfunctional. Section 3 then examines the hedging postures that Southeast Asian states have adopted in response to great-power competition, organizing them into three variations.

-
- 1) Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (August 2008): 163.
 - 2) See, for example, Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States' Alignment Behavior towards China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 500-514; Jürgen Haacke, "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 375-417.

1. ASEAN as an Apparatus for Maintaining Security: From Neutrality to Centrality³

(1) The Pursuit of Neutrality: The Cold War Era

In August 1967, the foreign ministers of five countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—gathered in Bangkok and proclaimed the establishment of ASEAN. Their motivation for pursuing regional cooperation lay in the need for regional stability, which would enable each state to focus on nation-building after independence.

In the early 1960s, the newly independent states of maritime Southeast Asia harbored sources of friction among themselves. Malaysia stood at the center of these tensions: Indonesia adopted a policy of *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) against the country, while the Philippines asserted a claim to Sabah on the island of Borneo. Singapore, then part of Malaysia, was at odds with Kuala Lumpur over the latter's vision of a Malay-centered state.

In 1965, a series of historical contingencies swept these issues away. In Indonesia, power passed from Sukarno to Suharto in the wake of the September 30 Movement; in the Philippines, a presidential election produced a change of administration; and Singapore separated from Malaysia. These states sought to overcome their interstate disputes and to secure the stable environment each needed to concentrate on nation-building and economic development. Combined with energetic mediation diplomacy by Thailand, the five countries reached agreement on the establishment of a new regional cooperation organization. The original motivation for ASEAN's establishment, in short, was regional security.

Yet at the time, achieving regional security in Southeast Asia through region-level cooperation alone was difficult. The region's security had a three-tier structure of external, regional, and domestic, with significant interaction among the three layers. Externally, the Cold War had erupted into a "hot war" on Vietnamese soil. U.S. military bases were located in the Philippines and Thailand, both of which supported U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, and the flames of the Vietnam War were reaching the very edges of ASEAN. Each member government also faced communist guerrilla threats at home and harbored particularly strong wariness of Mao Zedong's China, which advocated support for revolutionary movements across Asia.

3) This chapter is a substantially revised and expanded version of Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN no anzen hoshō: Churitsusei kara chushinsei e" [Security of ASEAN: From Neutrality to Centrality], *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security & Strategy] 3, no. 2 (March 2023): 105-121.

For these reasons, ASEAN's security required controlling the influence of extra-regional powers and securing regional autonomy. As a means of managing external influence, the idea of non-alignment exerted considerable influence on Southeast Asia, and on Indonesia in particular. Indonesia advocated the concept of "national resilience": the notion that national security could be advanced through each state's establishment of its political system, promotion of economic development, and pursuit of social stability so as to weaken anti-regime elements. The logic extended outward: as each state strengthened its national resilience, "regional resilience" would be realized, enabling the region to repel interference by extra-regional powers. In this way, the concept linked the three levels of security—domestic, regional, and external.⁴ The ideas of Indonesia, a regional power, influenced other states, and a shared awareness of the problem emerged within ASEAN about how to reduce the influence of extra-regional powers.

While other member states broadly shared Indonesia's view, security cooperation with extra-regional great powers, including former colonial rulers, remained indispensable to their national security as a practical matter. The Philippines and Thailand maintained their alliances with the United States, while Malaysia and Singapore wished to continue their cooperation with the United Kingdom.⁵

For ASEAN, therefore, the means of achieving regional security was not military but political cooperation, and its form was not a military alliance but "collective political defense." Indonesia, after all, espoused non-alignment as a guiding principle, and the member states had only just emerged from severe interstate disputes. They lacked the mutual trust required to commit military forces against a third country, and as a practical matter their militaries remained weak.⁶ Security premised on military power would be realized through the alliances and cooperative arrangements that individual member states maintained with external powers; in this sense, ASEAN and the military cooperation networks that ran through both the region and beyond stood in a complementary relationship.

With respect to the threat of communism from outside the region, foregrounding military cooperation centered on collective defense would have been excessively provocative toward the socialist bloc. The pursuit

4) Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia* (London: Routledge, 1989), 4-5.

5) Shaun Narine, *Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 14-15.

6) *Ibid.*, 15.

of regional security through loose political cooperation rested on the logic that one's own security was best advanced by avoiding undue provocation and by not arousing the wariness of others; this was, in effect, a strategy for avoiding the "security dilemma."⁷ In this way, ASEAN's security cooperation was demilitarized.

After ASEAN's founding, the external environment surrounding its members grew more demanding. First, the United States and the United Kingdom, which had backed ASEAN states' security through bilateral cooperation, both signaled their intention to reduce their military presence. In January 1968, the United Kingdom announced an acceleration of its withdrawal from East of Suez, including the removal of bases from Malaysia and Singapore. In July 1969, the United States announced the so-called Nixon Doctrine, declaring its intention to scale back its military presence in Southeast Asia, including withdrawal from Vietnam. China and the Soviet Union, sensing the vacuum of power left by U.S. and British retrenchment, signaled an intent to expand their influence in East Asia, including Southeast Asia.⁸

These external shifts compelled ASEAN to reconsider its security policy. Malaysia took the initiative, advocating a distinctly Southeast Asian conception of neutrality grounded in regional autonomy. The Malaysian proposal for the neutralization of Southeast Asia had a two-tier structure, regional and external. At the regional level, it called for agreement among regional states on principles such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, exclusion of the influence of extra-regional powers, and collective expression of will on important security issues. At the external level, it sought the agreement of extra-regional powers to treat Southeast Asia as a neutral region and to undertake the supervisory measures needed to guarantee that status.⁹

The Malaysian proposal initially encountered reservations from member states. Thailand and the Philippines, both U.S. allies, were reluctant; Singapore, with its complex relations with neighbors, regarded the engagement of external powers, including the United States, as essential. Indonesia, by contrast, was opposed to involvement by extra-regional powers

7) Kuroyanagi Yoneji, *ASEAN 35 nen no kiseki: "ASEAN Way" no koyo to genkai* [ASEAN's 35-year Path: Effectiveness and Limitations of the "ASEAN Way"] (Tokyo: Yushindo, 2003), 40-41.

8) Heiner Hänggi, *ASEAN and the ZOPFAN Concept*, Pacific Strategic Papers (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991), 12.

9) *Ibid.*, 14-15.

and resisted having Southeast Asia's neutrality guaranteed by them. The U.S.-China rapprochement symbolized by Nixon's visit to China, however, together with the transfer of the permanent seat on the UN Security Council from Taiwan to China, forced ASEAN to reconsider its response, particularly its policy toward China, and accelerated debate within ASEAN.¹⁰

In November 1971, a special meeting of the foreign ministers of the ASEAN states convened in Kuala Lumpur, where they issued the Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The ZOPFAN Declaration consisted of two strikingly concise points: that "Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand are determined to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, South East Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers"; and that "Southeast Asian countries should make concerted efforts to broaden the areas of cooperation which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship."¹¹

To make ZOPFAN effective, ASEAN sought to expand its geographic application. At the time the ZOPFAN Declaration was issued, there was no realistic prospect of obtaining the consent of extra-regional powers to treat Southeast Asia as a neutral zone. ASEAN therefore initially set its sights on North Vietnam, and later on a unified Vietnam (the Socialist Republic of Vietnam), and sought to win that country's agreement to the principles of ZOPFAN.¹²

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and its subsequent occupation, however, dispelled any atmosphere of cooperation and coexistence between ASEAN and Vietnam, and the two sides fell into severe rivalry throughout the 1980s. A "security complex" took shape in Southeast Asia, in which the structure of opposition between ASEAN and the Vietnamese "bloc" (Laos and the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia) became fixed, and ASEAN's security entered a strategic impasse.¹³

ASEAN applied diplomatic pressure through the United Nations, but Vietnam did not withdraw its forces in response. As the situation dragged on, differences emerged within ASEAN: Indonesia and Malaysia adopted a more conciliatory posture toward Vietnam, while Thailand and Singapore

10) Ibid., 15-16.

11) ASEAN, "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration," November 27, 1971.

12) Jürgen Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2003), 62.

13) Barry Buzan, "The Southeast Asian Security Complex," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 10, no. 1 (June 1988): 4.

maintained a hard line.¹⁴ What ultimately compelled Vietnam to withdraw was pressure from China and the Soviet Union. After Vietnam completed its withdrawal in September 1989, peace negotiations proceeded under the leadership of the UN Security Council, culminating in the Paris Peace Accords of October 1991. The Cambodia issue thus laid bare the limits of ASEAN's collective diplomatic capacity and of security pursued through political means alone. Yet the pursuit of neutrality throughout the Cold War became the seed from which centrality would later grow in the post-Cold War period.

(2) The Invention of Centrality: The Post-Cold War Era

The end of the Cold War brought ASEAN's enlargement and its transformation into "ASEAN equals Southeast Asia." It also fundamentally altered the strategic environment surrounding the organization, both within the region and beyond. The most significant factor of change was the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the accompanying decline in the U.S. military presence. During the Cold War, the United States had backed ASEAN's security with its own military power; in the early 1990s, however, against the backdrop of an intensifying base controversy in the Philippines, U.S. forces withdrew from that country. The withdrawal of U.S. forces created a power vacuum in the region, and ASEAN feared that China (and Japan) would expand to fill it. Indeed, China was accelerating its advance into the South China Sea during this period, and ASEAN's concerns were becoming reality.¹⁵

ASEAN was compelled to respond to a fluid strategic environment, particularly to the uncertainty arising from shifts in the balance of power among great powers. ASEAN exercised its own agency to construct a new regional order in the Asia-Pacific and to secure its own future security. The method it adopted was multilateralism. In July 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established as an outgrowth of the existing ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC). The ARF brought together major powers, including Japan, the United States, and China, around an ASEAN core, with the aim of improving the regional security environment through dialogue and cooperation.

14) Mely Caballero-Anthony, *Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 89-90.

15) Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture*, 71-72.

The ARF was the Asia-Pacific's first multilateral security cooperation framework and a mechanism of cooperative security. It was designed to focus on cooperation on non-traditional issues for the purpose of confidence-building, and to avoid rigid organization or institutionalization, so that regional states with diverse and at times conflicting strategic interests and security perceptions could participate broadly. The ARF was intended to complement, rather than replace, the U.S.-centered network of bilateral alliances, and was expected to mitigate the negative effects that unbridled balance-of-power competition among great powers would have on the regional security environment.¹⁶

The 2000s saw the establishment of further multilateral cooperation frameworks in rapid succession. The first was the East Asia Summit (EAS). The EAS was inaugurated as a venue in which the leaders of Asia-Pacific states could discuss issues facing the region, with the first meeting held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005. The initial sixteen participants comprised the ten ASEAN states plus Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand, with the United States and Russia formally joining in 2011. In the security domain, the EAS dealt primarily with non-traditional issues such as countering avian influenza, which was a salient concern at the time, and energy security.¹⁷

The next was the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), inaugurated in May 2006. The ADMM was established to enable ASEAN defense ministers to discuss regional security issues, share perceptions, and build confidence. It was conceived as a flexible and open framework, with the active engagement of ASEAN's dialogue partners and friendly states anticipated from the outset.¹⁸ As noted earlier, in ASEAN's early years, the lack of trust among member states had ruled out cooperation between their militaries. The fact that genuine cooperation among defense authorities finally began some 40 years after ASEAN's founding reflected the deepening of confidence among member states.

Building on the openness of the ADMM, the ADMM-Plus was launched in October 2010. Membership of the "Plus" was limited to ASEAN's

16) Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2014), 167-168.

17) Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN seiji anzen hosho kyodotai: Takokukan kyoryoku wakugumi no hatten to kadaï" [ASEAN Political Security Community: Development of Multilateral Cooperative Frameworks and Further Challenges], *Anzen Hosho Senryaku Kenkyu* [Security and Strategy] 2, no. 2 (March 2022): 129.

18) *Ibid.*, 130.

formal dialogue partners: Japan, the United States, China, the Republic of Korea, India, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand. One distinctive feature of the ADMM-Plus is its pursuit of practical security cooperation. At the inaugural meeting, the participating states agreed to establish Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) to conduct cooperation in five non-traditional fields: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR), Maritime Security, Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), Counter-Terrorism, and Military Medicine. Each EWG would be co-chaired by an ASEAN member state and a dialogue partner. The number of EWGs has since grown to seven, with the addition of demining and cybersecurity, and the groups conduct joint exercises and develop common standard operating procedures (SOPs).¹⁹

As ASEAN-centered multilateral frameworks were thus assembled in a layered fashion, the concept of ASEAN centrality took shape. Centrality, which began appearing in ASEAN's official documents from 2007, refers to ASEAN's role as the central actor within each multilateral framework and as the driving force behind their evolution in line with ASEAN norms. Concrete institutions and practices that anchor ASEAN's central role include the convention by which the ASEAN chair country hosts and chairs meetings of these multilateral frameworks, controlling the agenda and the conduct of discussion.²⁰

ASEAN centrality does not rest on the chair country mechanism alone; it also requires that major external powers respect ASEAN and engage actively with ASEAN-centered frameworks. Recognizing that external powers would find it difficult to take the lead individually in shaping the regional order in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN sought to play, in effect, a "glue" role, thereby making regional order formation possible.²¹ As the operation of multilateral frameworks based on ASEAN centrality became established practice, the very concept of centrality came to be accepted as a norm both within and beyond ASEAN.

During the Cold War, ASEAN had sought to exclude the influence of

19) Ibid., 130-133.

20) Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN no 'chushinsei': Iki-nai, iki-gai kankei no shiten kara" [ASEAN Centrality: From the Viewpoint of Intra-/Extra-regional Relations], *Boei Kenkyusho Kiyo* [NIDS Security Studies] 17, no. 1 (October 2014): 107-109.

21) Oba Mie, "ASEAN gaiko to ASEAN shokoku gaiko no aida: 'Chushinsei,' 'ittaisei' to Minamishinakai mondai" [Between ASEAN Diplomacy and the Diplomacy of ASEAN Member States: "Centrality," "Unity," and the South China Sea Issue], in *Higashi Ajia no katachi: Chitsujō keisei to togo wo meguru Nichi-Bei-Chu-ASEAN no kosa* [The Making of East Asia: Order, Integration and Stakeholders], ed. Oba Mie (Tokyo: Chikura Shobo, 2016), 28-29.

extra-regional powers as much as possible. In the post-Cold War era, that posture shifted to one of drawing out their engagement to the maximum extent. In this sense, the invention of centrality represented the realization of the recognition by extra-regional powers that ASEAN had sought through ZOPFAN, achieved only after the passage of time and within a strategic environment that had changed dramatically. ASEAN's neutrality, one might say, found a new mode of realization through multilateralism. Even as the era shifted from Cold War to post-Cold War, the basic form of ASEAN's security remained constant: the pursuit of regional autonomy through proper management of external relations centered on extra-regional powers, with political cooperation as the instrument for realizing it.

2. Drivers of Pluralization under Great-Power Competition

(1) Southeast Asian States' Hedging Strategies: The Two Levels of Hedging

From the latter half of the 2010s, great-power competition entered a phase of intensification and structuralization. One catalyst was the first Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy and the trade war it launched against China. In June 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released the "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," which adopted the slogan of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and explicitly defined China as a revisionist power.²²

One focal point of great-power competition was the South China Sea. After China's maritime expansion accelerated around 2010 and the territorial disputes over the South China Sea reignited, the United States took a strong strategic interest in the issue and maintained political engagement, treating the relevant waters as an area in which U.S. interests were at stake. China's reclamation and militarization of maritime features triggered rising military tensions between the two powers, and the Trump administration intensified freedom of navigation operations in these waters.²³

Confronted with intensifying great-power competition and with their

22) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," June 1, 2019, 3-4, 7.

23) Shoji Tomotaka, "'Minamishinakai no ryoyuken mondai' saiho: Beichu tairitsu no naka no Tonan Ajia" ["Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea" Revisited: Southeast Asia amid U.S.-China Rivalry], *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security and Strategy] 4, no. 2 (March 2024): 98.

region as one of its theaters, Southeast Asian states pursued hedging strategies on both multilateral and bilateral fronts. ASEAN's basic stance toward great-power competition was articulated in the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) of June 2019. In the AOIP, ASEAN declared its aim of "an Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation rather than rivalry" and its commitment to "remaining an honest broker within the strategic environment of competing interests," and positioned ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. As the platform for dialogue and implementation, it cited ASEAN's multilateral cooperation frameworks, particularly the EAS. On the South China Sea, the AOIP framed the issue as part of maritime cooperation more broadly, upholding freedom of navigation while emphasizing the cooperative dimension.²⁴

The approach articulated in the AOIP was one of "selective adaptation": refusing to lean toward either the United States or China, cooperating with whichever policies aligned with ASEAN's values and interests, and avoiding engagement with those that did not.²⁵ In other words, it constituted ASEAN's institutional hedging. Institutional hedging uses multilateral frameworks as a vehicle for collective action by multiple states to mitigate and offset broad, shared risks. Such frameworks therefore presuppose impartiality and inclusivity.²⁶ ASEAN incorporated all major external powers comprehensively into the EAS, the ADMM-Plus, and other multilateral frameworks, and sought to manage the balance of power between itself and external powers, as well as among external powers, through these frameworks.

At the level of individual states, however, the modes of hedging vary considerably. China is the largest trading partner for most ASEAN states, and its economic importance gives them all a common motivation to stabilize their relations with Beijing. At the same time, the assertive posture China displays in the South China Sea has generated serious concerns for the security of Southeast Asia as a whole.²⁷ Yet not all ASEAN members find

24) ASEAN, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," 1-5.

25) Shoji Tomotaka, "ASEAN to Beichu tairitsu: Yuragu chiiki chitsujo" [ASEAN and U.S.-China Rivalry: A Wavering Regional Order], in *Beichu tairitsu to kokusai chitsujo no yukue: Kosa suru sekai to chiiki* [U.S.-China Rivalry and the International Order: Intersecting Regional and Global Dynamics], eds. Igarashi Takayuki and Osawa Suguru (Tokyo: Toshindo, 2024), 45.

26) Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022): 363-364.

27) Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge?," 511.

vital interests at stake in the South China Sea; the depth of their concern varies. So too do their relations with the United States: while some states, such as the Philippines, are close treaty allies, others, such as Laos and Myanmar, have historically had thin or even tense relationships with Washington. As a result, the modes of hedging at the national level vary across ASEAN, and individual states' hedging postures are themselves variable, shifting with changes in domestic and external circumstances.

(2) The “Untrustworthy” China: Positive and Negative Effects on Southeast Asia

ASEAN sought to weather great-power competition through institutional hedging, but the great powers themselves are under no obligation to defer to ASEAN's preferences at every turn. China, intent on expanding its influence in Southeast Asia and consolidating its position there, has aggressively pushed both bilateral and multilateral approaches with economic cooperation as a lever.

The foundation of economic cooperation between ASEAN and China was a free trade agreement concluded in the early 2000s. In 2002, the two sides signed a “Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation,” which contained concrete measures including tariff reductions, and the effects were dramatic. Trade between the two expanded rapidly, growing at an average annual rate of nearly 30% from 2000 to 2008, with total trade volume increasing sixfold over that period. Since 2009, China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner.²⁸

The economic ties between ASEAN and China thus deepened rapidly during the 2000s, and this trend accelerated further in the 2010s. At the heart of this development was China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI's emphasis on infrastructure assistance to Southeast Asian states reflected not only economic objectives such as the stable supply of energy and resources, but also the aim of enhancing China's political influence in recipient countries through economic cooperation, ultimately tilting Southeast Asia as a whole in a “pro-China” direction. Eager for infrastructure financing, ASEAN states responded actively to Chinese overtures. In November 2019, ASEAN and China issued a “Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” with ASEAN as a

28) Shoji, “ASEAN to Beichu tairitsu,” 36-37.

body lending its formal endorsement to the BRI.²⁹

The BRI is, fundamentally, a collection of bilateral projects between China and individual countries. Southeast Asian states have planned, executed, and completed a long succession of infrastructure development projects with China. Such large-scale development carries political as well as economic significance: economic growth driven by major development projects is widely seen as enhancing the political legitimacy of the authoritarian rulers of Southeast Asian states.³⁰ Chinese investment is unevenly distributed across Southeast Asia, depending largely on the disposition of national leaders, with particularly high project concentrations in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia. These countries have formed especially close relationships with China through the BRI.

The COVID-19 pandemic further strengthened the economic ties between ASEAN and China. ASEAN needed Chinese support to recover from the economic damage of the pandemic, while China sought ASEAN as an ally in breaking through Western “containment.” China had been ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009; in 2020, ASEAN replaced the European Union (EU) to become China’s largest trading partner as well. China had long been an important economic partner for ASEAN; in recent years, however, the economic importance of ASEAN to China has likewise grown.³¹

If economic cooperation has been a positive factor in ASEAN’s relations with China, the South China Sea is the negative one. The roots of the disputes between ASEAN states and China over sovereignty in the South China Sea go back to the Cold War era, but the issue had quieted for a time during the 2000s. From around 2010, however, China resumed its active maritime expansion, and its posture toward ASEAN claimant states became more assertive and provocative. Today, against the backdrop of U.S.-China rivalry, the issue has expanded and grown more complex.

In dealing with the South China Sea issue, or more accurately, in dealing with China over that issue, ASEAN has consistently pursued a Code of Conduct (COC). Its aim has been to conclude a COC with China that would prevent escalation and provide for proper management of incidents when they occur. China, however, reluctant to be bound by legally constraining rules, has repeatedly delayed negotiations. ASEAN itself has also struggled

29) *Ibid.*, 37.

30) *Ibid.*, 38.

31) *Ibid.*, 39.

to reach agreement on the geographic scope of the code, and consultations have therefore tended to stagnate.³²

In the meantime, China has primarily relied on its economic clout to strengthen bilateral leverage, working to ensure that ASEAN does not coalesce as a unified front against it. In 2012, for example, when Cambodia held the ASEAN chair, China stepped up its economic assistance to Phnom Penh and pressured it to ensure that ASEAN would not adopt a position critical of China on the South China Sea. The strategy succeeded. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July of that year became deadlocked over the issue, and ASEAN failed for the first time in its history to issue a joint communiqué.³³ When Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia have held the chair, ASEAN's posture has likewise been conciliatory. China has also disrupted ASEAN by asserting the existence of agreements that did not in fact exist, such as a purported understanding with ASEAN not to internationalize the South China Sea issue.³⁴

In Southeast Asia, China has strengthened its influence in economic terms, while in security it has avoided directly engaging the demands of regional states, instead seeking to use political maneuvering to shape circumstances to its advantage. This conduct has produced a complex image of China in Southeast Asia. A 2025 opinion survey released by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore found that in response to the question, “In your view, which country/regional organisation is the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia?” 56% of respondents named China as the most economically influential actor in Southeast Asia (against 15% for the United States), while 38% identified China as the most politically and strategically influential actor (against 31% for the United States).³⁵ Across political, economic, and security dimensions, Southeast Asian states currently perceive China as exerting the greatest influence over them.

At the same time, concerns about China's regional rise are deeply rooted. In the same survey, 62% of respondents expressed concern about

32) Shoji Tomotaka, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu: Chuetsu funso kara takokukan tairitsu e* [Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Approaches of ASEAN, Vietnam, and the Philippines] (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai [The University of Nagoya Press], 2022), 235.

33) *Ibid.*, 173.

34) Donald K. Emmerson, “The Deer and the Dragon: Asymmetry Versus Autonomy,” in *The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*, ed. Donald K. Emmerson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 15.

35) ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, “The State of Southeast Asia 2025: Survey Report,” April 3, 2025, 32-35.

the expansion of China's economic influence, and 69% expressed concern in the political and strategic domains. Asked whether they trust China, 37% responded "trust" and 41% responded "distrust."³⁶ Closely tied to China though Southeast Asia is, it has not fully come to trust China.

(3) The "Unreliable" United States: A Diminishing Presence in Southeast Asia

To hedge against a rising China, ASEAN has placed considerable importance on strengthening relations with the United States. As the survey cited above indicates, while ASEAN acknowledges China's overwhelming influence over the region, it does not necessarily want a Chinese-dominated regional order. Particularly in the security domain, ASEAN regards U.S. engagement as the only effective counterweight to China's expanding military presence, centered on the South China Sea.

The United States, however, is "unreliable."³⁷ U.S. policy toward ASEAN shifts dramatically with each administration in terms of policy priorities and approach, including the basic question of how much the administration values relations with Southeast Asia in the first place. ASEAN has found itself buffeted by these wide swings, in stark contrast to China, which has consistently strengthened its relations with ASEAN on a foundation of economic cooperation and steadily expanded its regional influence.³⁸

Many of the ASEAN-related policies pursued by the first Trump administration were the opposite of what ASEAN states had hoped for. President Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) shortly after taking office, making clear that he had no intention of engaging with multilateral economic frameworks. He also showed no interest in ASEAN multilateralism, never once attending the EAS, and adopted a posture of confrontation with China. While the United States' role in checking a rising China was reassuring to ASEAN in some respects, the overheated rivalry epitomized by the trade war destabilized ASEAN's positioning and heightened anxieties that the region might be forced into a binary choice between the United States and China.³⁹

When the Joe Biden administration took office in January 2021,

36) Ibid., 58.

37) Amitav Acharya, *ASEAN and Regional Order: Revisiting Security Community in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), 80.

38) Shoji, "ASEAN to Beichu tairitsu," 41.

39) Ibid., 42-43.

ASEAN recalled the “honeymoon” it had enjoyed with the United States under Barack Obama and developed high expectations for President Biden’s policies. The Obama administration had emphasized ASEAN multilateralism and had taken the lead on multilateral economic linkages through the TPP, and similar hopes were attached to Biden, who had served as Obama’s vice president.

The Biden administration initially met those expectations. The *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, released in February 2022, expressed support for ASEAN multilateralism and centrality and explicitly affirmed the strengthening of U.S.-ASEAN cooperation. In May of that year, a U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit was held in Washington, marking the second time that ASEAN leaders had been invited to the United States for a face-to-face meeting since the summit hosted by President Obama in February 2016. The two sides agreed to cooperate on a range of issues, including maritime security, COVID-19 response, economic cooperation and connectivity, people-to-people exchanges, science and technology, and climate change. ASEAN welcomed this comprehensive cooperation, which was not narrowly confined to security.⁴⁰

The Biden administration’s policies, however, gradually drifted from ASEAN’s expectations. In its later phase, the administration shifted away from ASEAN multilateralism and began clearly emphasizing the strengthening of bilateral relations with individual Southeast Asian states, with an eye toward checking China. The most symbolic example came in September 2023, when, on his return from India after attending the G20, President Biden visited Vietnam rather than Indonesia, where the EAS was being held. During that visit, the United States and Vietnam upgraded their bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership.⁴¹ Against the backdrop of the structuralization of U.S.-China rivalry, U.S. policy toward China no longer shifted substantially across Republican and Democratic administrations. The emphasis was on strongly checking China in security and economic terms, and in Southeast Asia this orientation manifested as the strengthening of bilateral cooperation with countries seen as important from the standpoint of countering China.

Then, in January 2025, the second Trump administration took office.

40) Ibid., 43.

41) [U.S.] White House, “Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” September 10, 2023.

As Southeast Asian states (and indeed the wider world) had feared, the administration vigorously advanced its “America First” policies, and in April announced steep tariffs on a range of countries, including those in Southeast Asia. On the security front, the administration sought to lighten the U.S. burden and demanded that allies and partners shoulder more. At the 22nd IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) in 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth observed pointedly that, in the face of these threats, many countries were tempted by the idea of seeking both economic cooperation with China and defense cooperation with the United States, and warned Southeast Asian states that maintaining such a convenient posture would prove difficult.⁴²

(4) The Dysfunction of ASEAN Multilateralism

ASEAN multilateralism has been shaken by the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry and now faces a crisis of dysfunction. Within the multilateral frameworks, the cooperative atmosphere has dissipated and U.S.-China friction has become conspicuous. With the addition of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the major external powers have split into two groupings: Japan, the United States (and Europe) on one side, and China and Russia on the other. At the EAS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held in Cambodia in August 2022, exchanges of mutual recrimination over Ukraine and Taiwan continued throughout the proceedings.⁴³ ASEAN has continued to invite all external members, including Russia, in order to preserve inclusivity, but advancing cooperative discussions in these meetings has become increasingly difficult.

ASEAN’s room for maneuver on the South China Sea has likewise narrowed. Negotiations on the COC stalled sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online consultations made little headway, and even after in-person consultations resumed, progress has been limited. ASEAN and China have agreed on a single negotiating draft, and three readings of the draft have been completed thus far.⁴⁴ Yet there is no clear sense of how many further readings will be required, nor whether an effective code of conduct will emerge at the end of the process.

42) Pete Hegseth, “United States’ New Ambitions for Indo-Pacific Security,” First Plenary Session, 22nd Asia Security Summit, the Shangri-La Dialogue, May 31, 2025.

43) *Kyodo News*, August 6, 2022.

44) ASEAN, “Press Statement by the Chair of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Retreat,” January 19, 2025, 2.

3. Three Patterns of Pluralization and Diversification: An Alliance Anchor, a Non-Alignment Anchor, and Calibrating Distance from the United States and China

As discussed above, Southeast Asian states have responded to China's rise and the sharpening of U.S.-China rivalry through ASEAN's institutional (multilateral) hedging and through hedging at the level of individual states (bilateral). With ASEAN's institutional hedging gradually losing functionality, however, individual states have had no choice but to rely on the latter. They have therefore been compelled to strengthen national-level hedging, and as a result their security cooperation has become pluralized and diversified. The patterns vary with each country's circumstances. This section examines pluralization and diversification anchored in alliance, anchored in non-alignment, and centered on calibrating their distance from the United States and China.

(1) The Philippines: Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Alliance

The Philippines is advancing the pluralization and networking of security cooperation built on its alliance with the United States. The primary motivation for pluralization is the intensifying conflict with China in the South China Sea. Tensions between the Philippines and China have continued unabated since China's assertive posture in the South China Sea became pronounced around 2010, and in recent years the dispute over Second Thomas Shoal, west of Palawan, has grown particularly acute. The Philippines maintains the shoal under its administration and conducts regular resupply operations there with its navy and coast guard, but obstruction by the China Coast Guard has escalated. In February 2023, an incident occurred in which a China Coast Guard vessel directed a military-grade laser at a Philippine Coast Guard ship operating near the shoal.⁴⁵ Subsequent incidents have included dangerous close approaches against Philippine government vessels, the firing of water cannons, the gathering of large numbers of fishing boats believed to be maritime militia, the installation of floating barriers, and ramming by coast guard vessels.

In facing China in the South China Sea, the Philippines is supported by the United States. U.S. backing rests on the underlying alliance and on the

45) [Philippines] Department of Foreign Affairs, "PH Protests CN Coast Guard Use of Military-grade Laser, Dangerous Maneuvers against PCG near Ayungin," February 14, 2023.

gravity of the South China Sea issue, and is reinforced by tensions across the Taiwan Strait. For the United States, the geopolitical position of the Philippines, which faces the South China Sea and adjacent to Taiwan, is doubly strategic, and its importance is rising.

When President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. visited the United States in September 2022 to attend the UN General Assembly, a summit meeting with President Biden took place. At the meeting, President Biden reaffirmed the United States' ironclad commitment to the defense of the Philippines. The two leaders also reaffirmed the importance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance and emphasized their support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the peaceful resolution of disputes.⁴⁶

Under the leaders' agreement, U.S.-Philippines military cooperation advanced rapidly. At the defense ministers' meeting in February 2023, the U.S. side declared that the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines applies to Philippine armed forces, public vessels, and aircraft anywhere in the South China Sea. The two countries also resumed joint patrols in the South China Sea, and under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), they agreed to add four bases of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to the five sites previously available for U.S. forces' use.⁴⁷ Two of the four new sites are located in northern Luzon, facing Taiwan.

In April 2023, the third U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue was held for the first time in seven years, with the two countries agreeing to modernize the alliance, deepen interoperability, and accelerate capability development. In May, the Bilateral Defense Guidelines based on the 2+2 agreement were released.⁴⁸ Building on the agreement to strengthen information sharing contained in the guidelines, a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was concluded between the two countries in November 2024.⁴⁹

The Philippines has simultaneously strengthened cooperation with other

46) [U.S.] White House, "Readout of President Biden's Meeting with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.," September 22, 2022.

47) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Meeting with Philippine Senior Undersecretary and Officer in Charge of the Department of Defense Carlito Galvez," February 2, 2023; "Philippines, U.S. Announce Four New EDCA Sites," February 1, 2023.

48) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Fact Sheet: U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," April 11, 2023; "Fact Sheet: U.S.-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines," May 3, 2023.

49) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "Austin Caps Two-Day Visit to Philippines with Showcase of Growing Defense Cooperation," November 19, 2024.

U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia. In July 2024, it concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan, designed to facilitate the smooth conduct of joint exercises and improve interoperability between forces.⁵⁰ At the Japan-Philippines summit in April 2025, the two sides agreed to begin negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) to further strengthen operational cooperation and decided to consider an information protection agreement as well.⁵¹ With Australia, the two countries concluded a Strategic Partnership during Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's visit to the Philippines in September 2023, and agreed to hold annual defense ministers' meetings.⁵²

Underlying the Philippines' push to strengthen cooperation with Japan, the United States, and Australia is President Marcos's own active posture. Former President Rodrigo Duterte, by personal preference, did not seek cooperation with the United States, and U.S.-Philippines relations stagnated as a result. The personal disposition of the president carries strong influence in the Philippines' basic foreign and security policy, with the result that diplomatic and military cooperation can shift markedly from one administration to the next.⁵³ The swings are particularly large with respect to where the Philippines positions itself between the United States and China, and the Marcos administration's alignment with the United States and confrontation with China can be understood as a swing back from its predecessor. From another angle, public resentment of China's continuing harassment of the Philippines in the South China Sea also plays a role: President Marcos, attentive to public sentiment and seeking to consolidate domestic support, has maintained a firm stance toward China.

Building on the U.S. alliance network, the Philippines is pluralizing its security cooperation. In August 2023, for example, Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines conducted their first quadrilateral maritime exercise in the seas and airspace around Manila.⁵⁴ In April 2024, Australian forces participated in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise for the first time, with Japan participating as an observer; in 2025, the Self-Defense

50) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Signing of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement," July 8, 2024.

51) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan-Philippines Summit Meeting," April 29, 2025.

52) [Australia] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership between the Republic of the Philippines and the Commonwealth of Australia," September 8, 2023.

53) Shoji, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu*, 230.

54) *USNI News*, August 27, 2023.

Forces participated in Balikatan in earnest, deploying equipment.⁵⁵

Pluralization is also advancing in the political domain. In April 2024, the first Japan-U.S.-Philippines summit was held in Washington, and the three countries agreed to further promote maritime security cooperation in a quadrilateral format including Australia.⁵⁶ In May, a Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines defense ministers' meeting was held in Hawaii, where they jointly expressed concern over Chinese interference with Philippine resupply operations at Second Thomas Shoal. In November, a five-country defense ministers' meeting was held with the addition of the Republic of Korea.⁵⁷

The Marcos administration has reaffirmed a firm alliance with the second Trump administration as well, and continues to pluralize cooperation built on the U.S.-Philippines alliance. When Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth visited the Philippines in March 2025, the two countries underscored the unshakable strength of the U.S.-Philippines alliance and reaffirmed its importance to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. They also reaffirmed that the Mutual Defense Treaty applies to armed attacks against the armed forces, aircraft, and public vessels (including Coast Guard vessels) of either country anywhere in the South China Sea.⁵⁸ In addition, the Marcos administration adeptly concluded its tariff negotiations under the Trump administration. As a capstone, when President



U.S.-Philippines summit (Photo: Daniel Torok/White House/Planet Pix via ZUMA Press Wire/Kyodo News Images)

-
- 55) U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, "Philippines, U.S. Troops to Kick Off Exercise Balikatan 2024," April 17, 2024; [Japan] Joint Staff Office, "Bei-hi shusai takokukan kyodo kunren Balikatan 25 e no sanko ni tsuite" [Announcement: the U.S.-Philippines-led Multilateral Joint Exercise Balikatan 25], April 11, 2025.
 - 56) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States," April 11, 2024.
 - 57) [Japan] Ministry of Defense, "Joint Readout from Australia-Japan-Philippines-United States Defense Ministers' Meeting," May 3, 2024; "Joint Readout from Australia-Japan-Philippines-Republic of Korea-United States Defense Ministers' Meeting November 21, 2024," November 21, 2024.
 - 58) [U.S.] Department of Defense, "United States-Philippines Joint Statement on Secretary Hegseth's Inaugural Visit to the Philippines," March 28, 2025.

Marcos visited the United States in July, he secured President Trump's support for "President Marcos' freedom to act in the best interest of the Philippines."⁵⁹

(2) Vietnam and Indonesia: Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Non-Alignment

The core of Vietnam's security cooperation is non-alignment, but underpinning this posture is its overarching foreign policy of omnidirectional diplomacy. In the latter half of the 1980s, Vietnam launched the *Doi Moi* (renovation) policy, the central elements of which were the introduction of a market economy and integration into the international division of labor. To advance the latter goal, Vietnam shifted its diplomacy from an ideologically driven posture to a pragmatic one oriented toward economic development. Out of this shift came omnidirectional diplomacy, which since being formalized at the Seventh Party Congress in 1991 has been the basic principle of Vietnamese foreign policy.⁶⁰

In pursuing omnidirectional diplomacy, Vietnam has built on ASEAN as its foundation. Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995, and by being incorporated into ASEAN's multilateral mechanisms spanning politics, economics, and security, it was able to achieve economic development and to enhance its international standing and credibility, while at the same time placing its own security on a more secure footing. With respect to China in particular, ASEAN enabled Vietnam to deal with its giant northern neighbor not in a one-on-one encounter but through a framework involving the collective of Southeast Asian states.⁶¹

While actively engaging in ASEAN multilateralism, Vietnam has also vigorously pursued bilateral partnership diplomacy. Under this scheme, the highest tier of bilateral relations, aside from the "special relationships" with Laos and Cambodia, is the "comprehensive strategic partnership," followed by "strategic partnership" and "comprehensive partnership." Consistent

59) [Philippines] Presidential Communications Office, "Trump to PBBM: 'Make the Philippines Great Again,'" July 23, 2025.

60) Shoji Tomotaka, "Vietnam no 'take gaiko': Taikokukan kyoso de no seizon senryaku" [Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy": A Survival Strategy amid Great Power Competition], *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security and Strategy] 5, no. 2 (March 2025): 79.

61) Ralf Emmers and Huong Le Thu, "Vietnam and the Search for Security Leadership in ASEAN," *Asian Security* 17, no. 1 (2021): 67-69.

with the spirit of omnidirectional diplomacy, which seeks friendly and cooperative relations with all states, the diversification and broadening of partnerships through the conclusion of comprehensive strategic partnerships with as many countries as possible has become a driving force of Vietnamese diplomacy.⁶²

In the early years of *Doi Moi*, in tandem with the shift in basic foreign policy, Vietnam's view of security shifted from a narrowly military to a comprehensive conception. The comprehensive view rested on the recognition that military power alone could not effectively maintain or advance Vietnam's strategic interests, and that diplomatic, economic, and other instruments needed to be used in combination with military force in addressing security.⁶³ When confronted with security challenges, therefore, Vietnam came to mobilize military, diplomatic, and economic instruments together, prioritizing the peaceful resolution of issues.

Building on this premise, Vietnam has articulated the "four no's" policy, meaning no military alliances; no siding with one country against another; no foreign military bases and no using Vietnamese territory to oppose other countries; and no using force or threatening to use force in international relations.⁶⁴ These principles concisely express Vietnam's basic posture of non-alignment and peaceful resolution of disputes.⁶⁵

The South China Sea is the most important security issue for Vietnam, and in addressing it the country has pursued "omnidirectional security cooperation": the security analogue of omnidirectional diplomacy, which, anchored in non-alignment, strengthens security cooperation with diverse partners across multiple directions. While advancing cooperation with major partners such as the United States, Vietnam has at the same time cooperated with China where cooperation is possible.⁶⁶

The intensification and structuralization of U.S.-China rivalry, combined with the weakening of ASEAN's functions, has demanded ever finer balance from Vietnam in walking the tightrope between Washington and Beijing. Vietnam's strategic importance to both powers has grown: the United States

62) Shoji, "Vietnam no 'take gaiko,'" 80.

63) Nguyen Vu Tung, "Vietnam's New Concept of Security in the Context of *Doi-Moi*," in *Comprehensive Security in Asia: Views from Asia and the West on a Changing Security Environment*, ed. Kurt W. Radtke and Raymond Feddema (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 408.

64) Shoji, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu*, 243.

65) Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Alliance Politics in the South China Sea," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, no. 6 (2015), 5.

66) Shoji, *Minamishinakai mondai no kozu*, 126-129.

regards Vietnam as a powerful potential partner for effectively checking China on the South China Sea issue, while China seeks to keep its neighbor within its sphere of influence rather than allow it to drift to the U.S. side. Vietnam's response is to advance security cooperation with the United States cautiously, maintaining export-driven economic relations with Washington, while clearly signaling that no other country occupies a more important place in its foreign relations than China.

Nowhere was this Vietnamese style more clearly on display than in the visits of President Biden and President Xi Jinping to Vietnam in 2023. When President Biden visited Vietnam in September of that year, the two countries announced that they had concluded a comprehensive strategic partnership. The agreement marked the tenth anniversary of the comprehensive partnership concluded in 2013, but it was an unusual two-tier upgrade that bypassed the strategic partnership level.⁶⁷

Three months after President Biden's visit, President Xi Jinping visited Vietnam in December 2023. The joint statement issued during Xi's official visit was titled "Joint Statement concerning Continued Deepening of the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership to Build a Vietnam-China Community with a Shared Future that Carries Strategic Significance," and on the fifteenth anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership concluded in 2008, Vietnam thus elevated its relationship with China by one further notch.⁶⁸ Immediately after upgrading its partnership with the United States, Vietnam upgraded its partnership with China to an even higher level, signaling that its relationship with China was paramount.

Against the backdrop of great-power competition with the United States, China is moving to draw Vietnam closer. China's pressure in the South China Sea has accordingly been concentrated on the Philippines, and recent incidents involving Vietnam in those waters have been comparatively few. Reading China's intent to bring it closer, Vietnam has pursued near-term stabilization of its relations with Beijing. China's restraint in pressuring Vietnam in the South China Sea, paired with Vietnam's accommodating conduct toward Beijing's preferences, has produced an equilibrium, expanding the room for Vietnam to deepen cooperation with China in the political and economic domains.

67) [U.S.] White House, "Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," September 10, 2023.

68) Shoji Tomotaka, "Vietnam's China Policy: Deference and Check," *International Information Network Analysis IIN4*, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, February 5, 2024.

In April 2025, President Trump announced his country-by-country tariff rates, and Vietnam was hit with a 46% rate. Vietnam responded immediately, dispatching a negotiating team headed by the Minister of Industry and Trade to Washington shortly after the announcement and conducting energetic negotiations. As a result, Vietnam became the second country after the United Kingdom to conclude a tariff agreement with the United States, securing a reduction of the rate to 20%.⁶⁹

In late April 2025, just after the announcement of the Trump tariffs, President Xi Jinping visited Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. As noted above, Xi had visited Vietnam only in December 2023, but in light of President Trump's unilateral imposition of high tariffs on Southeast Asian states, China moved to draw the region's countries, including Vietnam, closer. Regarding the top-level meeting with General Secretary Tô Lâm, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicized Xi's criticism of the Trump administration: that "as beneficiaries of economic globalization, both China and Viet Nam should strengthen strategic resolve, jointly oppose unilateral, bullying acts, uphold the global free trade system, and keep global industrial and supply chains stable." Vietnam's Communist Party organ *Nhan Dan*, however, did not report this remark by Xi. China sought to bring Vietnam into a coalition critical of the United States, but while maintaining a posture of cooperation with Beijing, Vietnam refrained from openly criticizing Washington.⁷⁰

While maintaining a delicate balance between the United States and China, Vietnam is advancing the multilateralization of its external relations as part of its hedging strategy. This dynamic is reflected in the dramatic expansion of countries with which Vietnam has concluded comprehensive strategic partnerships. Until 2020, Vietnam had concluded comprehensive strategic partnerships with only three countries: China, Russia, and India. Since then, it has added the Republic of Korea (2022); the United States and Japan (2023); Australia, France, and Malaysia (2024); and New Zealand, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the United Kingdom (2025). The number of countries occupying the highest tier of Vietnam's external relations has thus swelled to fourteen. As the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry renders Vietnam's external environment more uncertain, the country

69) Reuters, July 3, 2025.

70) Shoji Tomotaka, "Bei-chu tairitsu no naka no Tonan Ajia: Shu Kinpei kokka shuseki Tonan Ajia rekiho no imi" [Southeast Asia amid U.S.-China Rivalry: The Significance of President Xi Jinping's Southeast Asia Tour], *NIDS Commentary*, April 25, 2025.

is increasingly active in “taking out insurance” through external relations.

Like Vietnam, Indonesia advances the pluralization of its security cooperation on a foundation of non-alignment. Indonesia’s basic foreign policy is the “free and active” approach, with “free” carrying the meaning of non-alignment in particular.⁷¹ Indonesia’s non-alignment orientation is a tradition rooted in the country’s founding. The country’s vast territory and population, the comparable scale of its economy and abundance of resources, its overall national power, its equidistance from extra-regional great powers, and its geographic advantage of lying at the junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans together make this policy possible.

Non-alignment also implies, conversely, the building of equally cooperative relations with all major external powers. With the United States and China, as well as Japan, Australia, India, and Russia, Indonesia has been approached primarily by the other side and has advanced its relationships accordingly. Indonesia’s strong position in external relations enables it to compartmentalize its relationships with each country, deepening security relations primarily with the United States and economic relations primarily with China.⁷² The Prabowo Subianto administration, which took office in October 2024, has fundamentally inherited this approach. The president has set out a “good neighbor” policy that aims to build external relations contributing to Indonesia’s growing national power and development.⁷³

Indonesia’s non-alignment policy and diplomatic independence at times allow it to take approaches in foreign relations that do not align with U.S. preferences. Joining BRICS, and skipping the G7 summit in June 2025 to visit Russia for the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, where President Prabowo met with Vladimir Putin, are part of Indonesia’s broader hedging effort to strengthen ties with the China-Russia bloc, distance itself from the West, and rebalance its external relations. The Prabowo administration in particular places a high priority on strengthening relations with China; the president visited China both in April 2024, after his election and before taking office, and in November 2024 after assuming office, holding meetings with President Xi Jinping. He also attended the military parade held in China in September 2025, despite domestic turmoil at home.

Indonesia advanced the diversification of its economic partnerships in

71) Vibhanshu Shekhar, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: Rise of an Indo-Pacific Power* (London: Routledge, 2018), 2-3.

72) *Ibid.*, 215.

73) Adhi Priamarizki, “Prabowo’s Post-election Diplomacy: Domestic-driven International Activism,” Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) Paper, no. 84, October 15, 2024.

response to the Trump tariffs, including reaching political agreement on a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with the EU. This can be seen as a hedging move against the uncertainty produced by the Trump administration. Yet the U.S. economic relationship is critical to Indonesia in terms of investment and trade, and Indonesia conducted intensive negotiations to lower the 32% tariff rate announced in April, ultimately settling at 19% in July.⁷⁴

While previously skeptical of “minilateral” arrangements centered on extra-regional powers such as the Quad and AUKUS, regarding them as challenges to ASEAN centrality, Indonesia has begun experimenting with its own minilateral initiatives. In June 2025, senior officials from Indonesia, Australia, and India gathered in Canberra to discuss the possibility of cooperation on maritime security.⁷⁵ Indonesia, however, does not yet share a common understanding with the other two countries on whether to view China as a security challenge, and the conditions are not yet in place for substantive consultations or cooperation. At present, the trilateral effort remains at an exploratory stage.⁷⁶ At the same time, Indonesia is advancing its bilateral security cooperation with Australia. In November 2025, during President Prabowo’s visit to Australia, the two countries announced their intention to conclude a treaty on common security. The treaty stipulates that, if either or both countries’ security is threatened, the parties will consult and consider what measures may be taken either individually or jointly to address those threats.⁷⁷

(3) Cambodia and Malaysia: Calibrating Distance from the United States and China

Cambodia has long been seen as pro-China, and that positioning has not fundamentally changed. Since the 2010s, China has been Cambodia’s largest investor, a major provider of official development assistance, and an

74) Iis Gindarsah, “Trump-Prabowo’s Trade Deal: Lingering Uncertainty and Looming Risks,” IDSS Paper, no. 73, July 23, 2025.

75) University of Melbourne, “Australia India Indonesia Strategic Dialogue Held in Canberra,” June 24, 2025.

76) Emirza Adi Syailendra, “Indonesia, Australia, and India: Overcoming Barriers to Trilateral Partnership,” Lowy Institute, July 1, 2025.

77) [Australia] Prime Minister of Australia, “Joint Media Statement,” November 12, 2025.

important trading partner.⁷⁸ Leveraging this economic cooperation, China exercises substantial political and security influence over the country. During President Xi Jinping's visit in April 2025, the two countries again reaffirmed their unwavering friendship.⁷⁹

At the same time, the strengthening of relations with China carries risks for Cambodia's autonomy and threatens to damage relations with other major external powers that stand in strategic competition with China. Cambodia therefore also pursues diversification in its external relations to mitigate the latent risks arising from its close ties with Beijing.⁸⁰

Cambodia's relationship with the United States, however, has been strained by the heavy-handed tactics and suppression of opposition that characterized the nearly four decades of the Hun Sen government. In recent years, Cambodia's tilt toward China, in particular its renovation of the Ream Naval Base with Chinese assistance, has raised U.S. concerns that a Chinese military base might be established on Cambodian soil. To dispel these suspicions, Cambodia invited a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel to call at the base.⁸¹ By emphasizing defense cooperation with Japan, Cambodia sought to demonstrate that it was not exclusively oriented toward China.

Cambodia has not joined BRICS, nor has it become a partner country, which would carry the significance of associate membership. There have been overtures from China, but Cambodia's reliance on the U.S. dollar in its economic structure and the importance of exports to the United States suggest a calculation that joining BRICS would jeopardize relations with Washington.⁸² In its own way, Cambodia is thus attempting to balance security and economic considerations.

Cambodia was initially hit with a tariff of 49% by President Trump but, through energetic negotiations, succeeded in lowering the rate to 19%. The U.S. handling of the tariff issue also benefited Cambodia in an unexpected

78) Vannarith Chheang and Heng Pheakdey, "Cambodian Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative," *NIDS ASEAN Workshop 2019: China's BRI and ASEAN*, NIDS Joint Research Series, no. 17 (2019), 7.

79) [Cambodia] Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "Outcomes of the State Visit of His Excellency Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, to the Kingdom of Cambodia from 17 to 18 April 2025," April 18, 2025.

80) Chanborey Cheunboran, *Cambodia's China Strategy: Security Dilemmas of Embracing the Dragon* (London: Routledge, 2021), 143.

81) [Japan] Maritime Staff Office, "Nichi-Kanbojia shinzen kunren ni tsuite" [Concerning the Japan-Cambodia Goodwill Exercise], April 23, 2025.

82) *South China Morning Post*, October 31, 2024.

way. In July 2025, when an armed clash broke out between Cambodia and Thailand over a border dispute, President Trump took the initiative to mediate, applying pressure with the warning that the U.S. would suspend ongoing tariff negotiations with both countries if the fighting did not cease. The president's statement exerted significant diplomatic pressure on Thailand, which had been refusing third-country involvement in the bilateral dispute. Thailand consequently agreed to ceasefire talks, and a ceasefire agreement was subsequently brokered through the mediation of the United States, China, and the ASEAN chair country, Malaysia. From its position of relative weakness, Cambodia had strongly sought the involvement of ASEAN and major external powers in its dispute with Thailand, and in the end it was the United States rather than China that played the leading role in securing the ceasefire. Prime Minister Hun Manet of Cambodia, as a token of gratitude to the United States, nominated President Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize.⁸³

Like the Philippines and Vietnam, Malaysia is a claimant in the South China Sea sovereignty disputes and stands in latent tension with China. For Malaysia, however, maintaining friendly cooperative relations with China, centered on the economy, is the overriding premise, and the country has handled the South China Sea issue cautiously to avoid spillover effects on its bilateral relationship as a whole. The prioritization of economic considerations over security in policy toward China has been broadly consistent since the Mahathir Mohamad government in the 1980s. The current administration of Anwar Ibrahim is likewise seeking to minimize the impact of the South China Sea issue so as not to damage cooperative relations with China.⁸⁴

Political and diplomatic relations with the United States, by contrast, have been stalled by the Gaza issue. Many Malaysians, especially Muslim Malays, have intensified their resentment of the U.S. role in supporting Israel during the Gaza conflict, and public sentiment toward the United States has deteriorated. Mindful of public sentiment, the Anwar government has hesitated to advance relations with Washington.

Amid intensifying great-power competition, Southeast Asian states grapple with how to maintain relations with both the United States and

83) Reuters, August 8, 2025.

84) Shoji Tomotaka, "Minamishinakai mondai to Marechia: Tairitsu no kaihi to onbin na taio" [The South China Sea Issue and Malaysia: Avoiding Rivalry and a Measured Response], *NIDS Research & Analysis* 1 (August 2025): 5-7.

China. In this respect, Malaysia currently has limited room for choice. As relations with the United States remain stalled, Malaysia's tilt toward China has become particularly pronounced in recent years. In June 2024, Malaysia hosted Premier Li Qiang in Kuala Lumpur for a grand celebration marking the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations.⁸⁵ That same month, Prime Minister Anwar announced that Malaysia had decided to apply for BRICS membership.⁸⁶

In the broader context of Malaysia's tilt toward the China-Russia bloc, including BRICS, the strengthening of bilateral relations with Russia has likewise been notable. In May 2025, during Anwar's second visit to Russia as prime minister, the two countries agreed at the summit with President Putin to further develop bilateral relations in investment and trade.⁸⁷

In the list of Trump tariffs announced in April 2025, Malaysia faced a rate of 24% (subsequently raised to 25%). The Anwar government's response combined working-level negotiations with the United States with a politically pronounced tilt toward China. A symbolic illustration was Prime Minister Anwar's speech at the welcome banquet for President Xi Jinping during Xi's visit to Malaysia that same month. Without naming the United States, Anwar criticized it in unmistakable terms: "today, at a time when multilateralism is under tremendous strain—when some nations abandon the principle of shared responsibility and others question long-standing commitments," and "in some quarters, the rules-based order has been turned on its head—dialogue has yielded to demands, tariffs are imposed without restraint, and the language of cooperation is drowned beneath the noise of threats and coercion." He praised China by contrast as a defender of the free trade regime: "In these trying times, the world yearns for steadiness, reliability and purpose. We see this in China's conduct."⁸⁸

Yet Malaysia's relations with the United States have not stagnated entirely. In tariff negotiations, the country engaged competently with the U.S. side, and in the end Prime Minister Anwar negotiated directly

85) [Malaysia] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership towards China-Malaysia Community with a Shared Future," June 18, 2024.

86) David Han Guo Xiong, "Malaysia's Bid for Membership of BRICS: Optimism and Uncertainties," IDSS Paper, no. 79, October 3, 2024.

87) *Bernama*, May 14, 2025.

88) [Malaysia] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Speech by the Honorable Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia at the State Banquet in Honor of His Excellency Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China," April 16, 2025.

with President Trump to reduce the tariff rate from 25% to 19%.⁸⁹ As ASEAN chair, moreover, Malaysia succeeded in securing President Trump's attendance. In October 2025, President Trump attended the signing ceremony of the peace agreement between Thailand and Cambodia in Kuala Lumpur, casting himself as a "peacemaker," and also participated in the U.S.-ASEAN Summit.



Signing ceremony of the Thailand-Cambodia peace agreement, with President Trump (AFP / Jiji Press)

The five countries discussed thus far do not exhaust the picture; the remaining six ASEAN members likewise show various patterns of cooperation. In broad terms, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, and Timor-Leste continue to place significant weight on ASEAN's institutional hedging while pursuing the conventional hedging method of looking to China for economic ties and the United States for security. Laos and the Myanmar military regime, by contrast, have thin or strained relations with the United States to begin with, leaving little room for hedging between Washington and Beijing; both therefore balance between China and Russia. The variations of hedging among Southeast Asian states can be summarized as follows.

Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Alliance		The Philippines
Pluralization and Diversification Anchored in Non-alignment		Vietnam, Indonesia
Calibrating Distance from the United States and China	Toward the United States	Cambodia
	Toward China	Malaysia
Simultaneous Pursuit of Institutional and National-level Hedging		Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste
Hedging between China and Russia		Laos, the Myanmar military regime

89) *The Straits Times*, July 31, 2025.

Conclusion

ASEAN was founded during the Cold War with the aim of ensuring regional security. As shifting external circumstances buffeted the region, the central task of managing the influence of extra-regional great powers came into ever sharper focus, and ASEAN sought to address it through its own pursuit of neutrality. In the dramatically transformed strategic environment of the post-Cold War period, the response to the same task became one of incorporating major external powers into ASEAN-centered multilateral cooperation frameworks. As ASEAN's multilateralism-based security system took shape, the concept of centrality crystallized. Although the strategic environment surrounding ASEAN changed greatly between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, and although ASEAN's method shifted from neutrality to centrality, the underlying objective of properly managing relations with major external powers remained constant.

The intensification and structuralization of great-power competition centered on U.S.-China rivalry has impeded the functioning of the multilateral security system that ASEAN built, and ASEAN's institutional hedging has gradually lost effectiveness. As a result, Southeast Asian states have strengthened their hedging at the national level, and in the process have pluralized and diversified their security cooperation.

The modes of pluralization and diversification among Southeast Asian states are varied. This chapter has examined three patterns: pluralization anchored in alliance (the Philippines), pluralization anchored in non-alignment (Vietnam and Indonesia), and the calibration of their distance from the United States and China (Cambodia toward the United States, and Malaysia toward China). Although pluralization and diversification are driven primarily by external factors such as the presence or absence of an alliance, geopolitical considerations, and the trajectory of relations with China, domestic factors also play a role. It is important to attend to dynamics in which the personal worldviews and preferences of presidents, as in the Philippines and Indonesia, exert significant influence on foreign policy, and in which leaders shift their external policies in response to popular sentiment and nationalism, illustrating the dynamics between domestic politics and foreign policy.

Southeast Asian states have been buffeted by great-power competition centered on U.S.-China rivalry. At the same time, however, each has steadily expanded its national power and international presence through sustained economic growth, and the United States and China themselves have come

to recognize the strategic importance of Southeast Asia. If ASEAN can deepen its cohesion, the region need not merely be unilaterally buffeted by great-power competition; it may also enhance its own diplomatic leverage. As discussed in this chapter, ASEAN multilateralism currently stands at a crossroads. The accession of Timor-Leste, however, is welcome news. Whether an ASEAN that has once again realized regional inclusivity can use flexible and innovative approaches to enhance its strategic autonomy bears close watching.



India's Multi-Alignment

Choosing a Multipolar World or
Partnering with Like-Minded Countries?

IZUYAMA Marie

Chapter 7

U.S.-India summit (February 2025)
(Photo: EPN/Newscom/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

This chapter conceptualizes India's multi-alignment as a bundle of two policies: engaging in multilateral institutions and forums and leveraging strategic partnerships. India's earlier strategic partnerships contained an element of guarding against U.S. unilateralism, but from 2000 onward India also deepened its partnership with the United States in pursuit of U.S. "recognition," hence admission to the club of great powers. Within BRICS, its principal vehicle for global multi-alignment, India invokes a "multipolar world" and presses for reform of the international financial order and the United Nations. In the Indo-Pacific, however, India sets aside its "multipolar world" discourse and behaves as a like-minded partner. Through its engagement with Singapore, India has advanced naval cooperation with the United States and its allies while steadily building up joint patrols with Indonesia and Thailand. India's multi-alignment in the maritime security domain has developed along its own trajectory, one that cannot be reduced to mere competition with China in the region.

Introduction

Indian “multi-alignment” and the related notions of a “multipolar world” and “strategic autonomy,” tend to be regarded with suspicion by the United States and its like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. India occupies a key place in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” vision as a country that shares values and interests with Japan in the region. Maritime security cooperation among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, which originated in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, has matured into the Malabar naval exercise that the four countries now conduct jointly. The Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Strategic Dialogue (Quad) was reactivated in 2017, and summit-level meetings were held several times. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, India abstained from resolutions condemning Russia and expanded its purchases of Russian oil, exposing differences with Japan, the United States, and Australia. Against the backdrop of a deepening rift between the United States and Europe on one side and Russia and China on the other over the war in Ukraine, Japanese commentators have also voiced frustration: “Why does India participate in the Quad while also belonging to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)?” Even so, as long as competition with China remained the priority, the United States tolerated India’s autonomous behavior.¹

This environment changed abruptly amid tariff negotiations. India’s trade surplus with the United States in 2024 stood at \$41.5 billion, smaller than Japan’s and ranking eleventh in the world.² Under the country specific reciprocal tariff rates announced by President Donald Trump in April 2025, India was adjusted a 26% tariff. On August 6, 2025, however, President Trump announced an additional 25% tariff on the grounds that India’s purchases of Russian oil were undermining U.S. policy toward Russia.³ Earlier, at the BRICS summit held in Rio de Janeiro in July, the member states had issued a statement expressing “serious concerns” over “unilateral

1) Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “India and the Global Balance of Power,” *Project Syndicate*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-us-china-balance-of-power-without-formal-alliance-by-joseph-s-nye-2023-06>.

2) “US Trade Deficit by Country 2025,” *World Population Review*, accessed December 15, 2025, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/us-trade-deficit-by-country>.

3) [U.S.] White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Addresses Threats to the United States by the Government of the Russian Federation,” August 6, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/factsheets/2025/08/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-addresses-threats-to-the-united-states-by-the-government-of-the-russian-federation/>.

tariff measures,” prompting President Trump to declare that he would impose a 10% tariff on BRICS members.⁴ President Trump’s politicization of tariffs has caused a sensation in the Indian media.⁵

At the root of the deterioration in U.S.-India relations lies the Trump administration’s denial to tolerate the strategic autonomy that previous U.S. administrations had been willing to overlook. Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has voiced disappointment that India, while developing its bilateral relationship with the United States, also aligns with anti-American states and groupings that include such states, concluding that India’s pursuit of a “multipolar world” is a misguided policy inimical to Indian interests.⁶

Why does India’s multi-alignment displease the Trump administration? More fundamentally, what is India’s multi-alignment? This chapter examines the meaning of India’s multi-alignment by relating it to changes in India’s position within the “liberal international order.”

1. Multi-Alignment, Multipolar World, and Strategic Autonomy

This section clarifies what is meant by multi-alignment, multipolar world, and strategic autonomy. After defining the terms, it considers how they relate to one another and what their policy implications are.

“Multi-alignment” is not a term used officially in the annual reports of India’s Ministry of External Affairs or in its various policy documents. External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, however, uses the term frequently in his speeches.⁷ The concept is laid out in his book *The India Way*, which was published in 2020. There he argues that multi-alignment “appears more energetic and participative as compared to an earlier posture of abstention or non-involvement,” adding that it might also

4) Stanly Johny, “Trump vs BRICS,” *The Hindu*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-view-from-india-newsletter-trump-vs-brics/article69810598.ece>.

5) Through October 2025, the Indian press repeatedly reported, almost daily, on President Trump’s frequent declarations that “BRICS is attacking the dollar.”

6) Ashley Tellis, *Multipolar Dreams, Bipolar Realities: India’s Great Power Future* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep72438.3>.

7) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Transcript of External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, in Conversation with Mariano-Florentino (Tino) Cuéllar of Carnegie Endowment, Washington DC (October 2, 2024),” October 2, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/interviews.htm?dtl/38364/>.

appear opportunistic, whereas India is really seeking strategic convergence rather than tactical convenience.”⁸ He also notes that multi-alignment cannot be set forth as a single catch phrase for Indian policy, but it is one description of India's response to global uncertainty.

The figure who characterized the foreign policy of the Narendra Modi administration as “multi-alignment” and gave the term wide currency is Ian Hall of Griffith University. Hall argues that multi-alignment did not begin abruptly under Modi but had been a consensus among India's foreign policy elite for at least the previous decade. He treats multi-alignment systematically as a bundle of three policies. The first is bids for a range of multilateral institutions and forums. The second is pursuit of formal and informal partnerships, particularly “strategic partnerships.” The third is an avoidance to commit to any normative agenda such as liberal economic norms or humanitarian intervention, which Hall calls “normative hedging.”⁹ Based on Hall's thesis, “multi-alignment” is widely used as an analytical concept among scholars.

The “multipolar world,” by contrast, has long been used in various Indian diplomatic documents to describe a policy goal, and in recent years it has also been used to describe the reality of the world. Among the earliest appearances of the term in Indian diplomatic documents are the strategic partnerships established with France in 1998 and with Russia in 2000.

The original text of the India-France strategic partnership has not been made public,¹⁰ but according to the 2024 joint statement issued by the two leaders, the partnership was based on “strong belief in sovereignty and strategic autonomy, a shared commitment to a multipolar world, to the rule of law and the principles of the UN Charter.”¹¹ The India-Russia strategic partnership took as its point of departure “the need to build a multipolar global structure based on the sovereign equality of all states and peoples,

8) S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2020), 103.

9) Ian Hall, “Multialignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi,” *Round Table* 105, no. 3 (2016): 271-286.

10) Not only is the document no longer available online, but the Indian Ministry of External Affairs annual report from that period, despite its extensive coverage of the leaders' mutual visits, makes no mention whatsoever of the conclusion of the strategic partnership.

11) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “India-France Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of French Republic, to India (25-26 January 2024),” January 26, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/>.

democratic values, and justice.”¹²

What the two strategic partnerships had in common was their stance toward India’s nuclear tests of May 1998.¹³ Both France and Russia distanced themselves from the U.S. approach of imposing sanctions to halt nuclear development. After India’s first nuclear test in 1974, when the United States suspended all nuclear cooperation, including supply of fuel, France and Russia continued nuclear cooperation with India. Following the 1998 tests, Russia agreed to rejuvenate construction of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, a Soviet-era project that had been left dormant. France, for its part, agreed in 1999 to exchange information and cooperate on nuclear safety.

The strategic partnership with France was set in motion in January 1998, when President Jacques Chirac was invited as the chief guest on India’s Republic Day. After the nuclear tests, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited France, and the strengthening of relations accelerated. In 1999 a strategic dialogue, a working group on energy issues, ministerial consultations, and a high-level committee on defense equipment were established or revived in rapid succession. Defense cooperation and nuclear cooperation became the pillars of the strategic partnership. The theme of the symposium held in 2000 alongside the ministerial-level India-France Forum was “India and France in a Multipolar World.”¹⁴ However, apart from the common position of distancing themselves from what India termed the “sanctions regime” on India’s nuclear tests, it remains unclear what image of a “multipolar world” the two countries actually shared.

The “multipolar world” envisaged with Russia rests on a clearer understanding: countering a unipolar world under the U.S. dominance. In India, President Vladimir Putin is credited with correcting the pro-American course of Boris Yeltsin and returning to the strategic partnership with India.¹⁵ The catalyst for U-turn was the bombing of Yugoslavia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). India and Russia shared a concern over bombings without the authorization of the United Nations and over the standardization of “humanitarian intervention.”

12) “Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation,” Free Republic, October 3, 2000. Downloaded and printed on January 27, 2005, from the U.S. news site Free Republic; the link is currently broken.

13) External Affairs Minister Jaishankar himself refers to France’s “exceptional response.” Jaishankar, *The India Way*, 125.

14) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1998–1999; 1999–2000.

15) Vinay Kaura, “India’s Changing Relationship with Russia: Challenges and Convergences,” *The RUSI Journal* 163, no. 1 (2018): 48–60, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2018.1447851.

After September 11, 2001, Russia and India also shared, to some extent, uneasiness over U.S. unilateralism or the “unipolar world.” In September 2001, on Russia’s initiative, the first Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral foreign ministers’ meeting was convened. The joint communiqué issued at the fourth RIC foreign ministers’ meeting in Vladivostok in June 2005 opened with a statement of their shared view of the international order and of cooperation toward a “multipolar world.” It identified the “democratization of international relations” and “international law, equity, and mutual respect” as common approaches and reaffirmed the importance of the role of the United Nations.¹⁶ Although the RIC cooperation aimed at “global multipolarization” was declared to be “not targeted against any other country,”¹⁷ it was clearly incompatible with the idea of U.S. preeminence.



The leaders of China, Russia, and India at the SCO summit (September 2025) (Photo: EPN/Newscom/Kyodo News Images)

Finally, “strategic autonomy,” which is connected to both “multi-alignment” and “multipolar world,” is a policy term but is not used frequently. The Ministry of External Affairs annual report for fiscal year 2018 stated that “with strategic autonomy at its core, India continued to step up its engagement with all the major powers of the world, taking independent decisions in the national interest.”¹⁸ From this point onward, “engagement with all the major powers” became a recurring theme. The annual report cited Russia, the United States, China, and Japan as examples of major powers with which India was engaged, but in his speech at the IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) in June 2018, Prime Minister Modi singled out Russia, the United States, and China. In that speech, Modi cited India’s Strategic Partnership with Russia, which has “matured to be

16) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Communiqué on the Results of the Informal Trilateral Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of India, Russia and China,” June 2, 2005, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/2596/>.

17) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Communiqué of the Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of India and the Russian Federation,” October 24, 2007, <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?5926/>.

18) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 2018–2019, 5.

special and privileged,” as a measure of its strategic autonomy. At the same time, he described the global strategic partnership with the United States as having “overcome the hesitations of history.” With regards to China, he indicated cooperation is expanding as the countries are “the world’s two most populous countries and among the fastest growing major economies.”¹⁹ This expressed India’s confidence that, independently of U.S.-China rivalry, it could maintain favorable bilateral relations with all three great powers simultaneously.

2. Evolution of the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership

(1) U.S. Recognition: From Parity with Pakistan to Parity with China

This section traces the development of the U.S.-India strategic partnership in relation to India’s self-image of its status in the international order.

The departure of the U.S.-India relationship from their Cold War “estranged relationship” and “cold peace” toward their contemporary strategic partnership was President Bill Clinton’s visit to India in March 2000. From the U.S. perspective, this was a period in which Washington shifted toward engagement with India in order to offset the prospect of China and Iran becoming dominant powers in the region.

In a 1999 report titled *Asia 2025*, released by the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense, India was identified as a partner with whom the United States should engage to “preempt” its aligning with China or Iran.²⁰ From the Indian perspective, the U.S. should address India’s “grievances” and “recognize” India as a rising power and potential partner as a precondition for building trust.²¹

The grievances of India’s case meant lack of understanding on the U.S. side, or failure to take seriously the security concerns India had long held vis a vis China and Pakistan. With respect to perceptions of China, India’s

19) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018),” June 1, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

20) [U.S.] Advisor to the Secretary of Defense for Net Assessment, *Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) 1999 Summer Study Final Report, ASIA 2025*, July 25–August 4, 1999, 137–140.

21) On recognition, see Pål Røren, “The Power of Recognition: Rethinking the Instrumentality of Status in World Politics,” *International Affairs* 101, no. 3 (2025): 987–1004. On grievance, see Sanjay Pulipaka, “Conflict, World Order and the Politics of Grievance,” Politeia Research Foundation, October 20, 2023, <https://prfworld.org/conflict-world-order-and-the-politics-of-grievance/>.

concerns were understood by the United States for the first time during the bilateral negotiations that followed the 1998 nuclear tests. Immediately after the tests, Prime Minister Vajpayee cited China in his letter to President Clinton as one of the reasons that had led India to test, but the United States initially gave this little credence.²² Through intensive consultations between Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, however, the United States came to acknowledge India's concerns about China, which in turn made it possible for India to open up to the United States.²³ As for perceptions of Pakistan, U.S. understanding was indicated during the 1999 Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Washington seeking U.S. mediation, but President Clinton demanded an unconditional withdrawal, putting an onus on Pakistan.²⁴ This also meant that the United States now recognized the infiltration of militants from Pakistan into India-administered Kashmir that India had long appealed. India's nuclear tests and the Kargil crisis became turning points in U.S.-India relations. From this point onward, the United States began the decoupling of India from Pakistan, which is often cited as "de-hyphenation."²⁵

In March 2000, Clinton became the first U.S. president to visit India in twenty-two years, and the joint statement with Prime Minister Vajpayee titled "U.S.-India Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century" was issued which transformed the Cold War-era U.S.-India relationship to a new partnership of shared ideals.²⁶ The statement opened by declaring that "we are two of the world's largest democracies" and maintained that "freedom and democracy are the strongest bases for both peace and prosperity," emphasizing that the U.S.-India partnership was grounded in the shared value of democracy.²⁷

22) Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 53-54.

23) Talbott, *Engaging India*, 148.

24) Bruce Riedel, "American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House," in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, ed. Peter R. Lavoy (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 137-143.

25) The term refers to not joining India and Pakistan with a "hyphen," that is, not treating the two countries as equivalent. Deputy Secretary of State Talbott was directly petitioned on hyphenation by External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh. Talbott, *Engaging India*, 85.

26) Donald Camp, "The Clinton Visit: 25 Years after 'Resetting' the US-India Relationship," *The Week*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2025/03/27/the-clinton-visit-25-years-after-resetting-the-us-india-relationship.html>.

27) [U.S.] Department of State, Archives, "Joint U.S.-India Statement," March 21, 2000, https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/human_rights/democracy/fs_000321_us_india.html.

The U.S. reassessment of India's "democracy" took place in two contexts: democracy versus authoritarianism as a question of political regime, and "religious freedom" or the "separation of religion and state" versus religious extremism and fundamentalism. Bluntly stated, this was a reassessment of Indian democracy defined in contrast to China, Iran, and Pakistan.

The U.S.-India partnership also looked beyond bilateral issues toward "shared responsibility" in global governance. Specifically, the partnership took up terrorism, UN peacekeeping, and nuclear non-proliferation. It emerged from the convergence of two motives: the U.S. new policy orientation to integrate India into the global order as a "responsible state" alongside, or in place of, China; and India's reception of this new policy orientation as "recognition" of its rise.

(2) India Aiming for the High Table: A Search for a New Relationship with the United States

For India, the deepening of the strategic partnership with the United States offered a path to elevate its status from being managed as a developing country to taking a seat at the negotiating table on equal terms with developed countries to set the rules. Concurrently, India was emerging as one of the attractive high-growth economies given the name BRICs,²⁸ within which India obtained parity with China rather than with Pakistan.

On July 18, 2005, the U.S. administration under George W. Bush gave a nod to start negotiations for nuclear cooperation with India. This was a major shift in U.S. non-proliferation policy toward India, and because it required congressional approval and the consensus in the international non-proliferation regime, it took the form of a reciprocal promise between the President and the Prime Minister. Even so, Bush and Manmohan Singh laid the groundwork for nuclear cooperation. In the joint statement issued at the summit, President Bush called India "a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology" and declared that India should enjoy the benefits and

28) The term "BRICs" first appeared in the 2001 Goldman Sachs report. Jim O'Neill, "Building Better Global Economic BRICs," Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper, no. 66 (2001), <https://www.goldmansachs.com/pdfs/insights/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf>. This chapter uses "BRICs" for the period before South Africa's accession in 2011.

privileges befitting that status.²⁹ In October 2008, the U.S.-India nuclear cooperation agreement was finally signed. As the term “nuclear deal” suggests, the agreement also had a transactional dimension: in exchange for U.S. recognition of India’s exceptional status under the non-proliferation regime, India would cooperate with U.S. global strategy. Thus, India was granted a status equivalent to that of a nuclear-weapon state, and got access not only to nuclear technology but also to dual-use technologies.

The year 2008 thus marked the opening of India’s ascent towards global status. In November, the inaugural G20 summit was held in Washington, and India participated alongside Russia (a member of the G8), China, Brazil, and others. This was the moment at which it was recognized that the cooperation of emerging economies was indispensable to the reconstruction of the international financial and economic system in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.³⁰ Having effectively achieved the status of a *de facto* nuclear-weapon state and gained an opportunity to participate in international financial decision-making facing the G7 across the same table, India next sought U.S. recognition in support of permanent membership on the UN Security Council. The U.S.-India joint statement of November 2009 referred to UN Security Council reform, and the joint statement of November 2010 went further, calling for reform that “includes India as a permanent member.”³¹

While the United States thus recognized India’s status elevation, initiating nuclear cooperation, providing equipment, and signaling support for permanent membership on the UN Security Council, friction between India and China was increasing along the land border and at sea, as discussed in the next section. Against this backdrop, an eminent persons’ report titled

29) [U.S.] White House, “Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh,” July 18, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/pr/2005/49763.htm>.

30) On the attempt to integrate emerging economies into the existing international system through the G20, see Axel Berger, Andrew F. Cooper, and Sven Grimm, “A Decade of G20 Summitry: Assessing the Benefits, Limitations and Future of Global Club Governance in Turbulent Times,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2009), DOI: 10.1080/10220461.2019.1705889.

31) [U.S.] Government Publishing Office (GPO), “Joint Statement by the United States of America and India: Partnership for a Better World,” November 24, 2009, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-200900947/pdf/DCPD-200900947.pdf>; [U.S.] White House, “Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Singh of India,” November 8, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/joint-statement-president-obama-and-prime-minister-singh-india>.

Non-Alignment 2.0, released in 2012, seriously considered the possibility of an alliance with the United States. The report observed that, because India's interests were shaped more decisively by "direct competition" with China than by relations with the United States, it might seem natural to imagine the United States as an "alliance partner." It rejected this conclusion as premature, however, citing the risk that an improvement in U.S.-China relations could come at the expense of U.S.-India relations and the uncertainty of how the United States would actually respond when China posed a threat to Indian interests. The report further pointed to the possibility that the United States can be "too demanding" in its friendship and "resentful" of India's friendly relations with other countries.³²

This skepticism toward alliances, and especially the distrust of having one's relations with other countries constrained by the United States, has not been dispelled today. In a recent interview, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar dismissed the alliance model, stating that what suits the new era is something more like "a gathering without legal or contractual obligations," like a "club," and that "treaty-based concepts are typical of the old order."³³

3. Multi-Alignment at the Global Level: BRICS and the Aspiration for a Multipolar World

The multilateral forums at the global level that India today values most are BRICS and the G20.³⁴ Whether BRICS is a revolutionary challenge to the liberal international order or a reformist complement to the existing order has been debated for the past decade. Certainly, the BRICS narrative, with its goal of a "multipolar world," has an anti-Western dimension. Yet BRICS also has another dimension for India: a platform through which to obtain recognition from the West, specifically an admission to the rule-makers' "club" of the G7-centered international economic order.

From the Indian perspective, the genealogy of BRICS combines both impulses: the former represented by the trilateral foreign ministers' consultation among Russia, India, and China (RIC), launched in 2001, and the latter by the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), launched in 2003. The annual reports of India's Ministry of External

32) Sunil Khilnani et al., *Non-Alignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century* (Centre for Policy Research, 2012), 32.

33) *Financial Times*, March 14, 2025.

34) S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat Matters* (Rupa Publications India, 2024), 106.

Affairs suggest, however, that it was the latter line, namely the policy coordination among the leaders of India, Brazil, and South Africa who had been invited to the G8 Évian Summit, that became the template for BRICs.

In July 2008, on the sidelines of the G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit, to which India had also been invited, a meeting of BRICs leaders was convened on Russia's initiative.³⁵ At the inaugural G20 summit held in Washington in November of the same year, the leaders of Russia, India, China, and Brazil also met. In June 2009, the first BRICs leaders' summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, alongside the SCO summit.³⁶ Because the inauguration of BRICs was thus closely tied to the launch of the G20 summit process, coordinating positions in the G20 was set as a BRICs objective from the outset.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs categorizes BRICS as “multilateral economic relations” in its annual reports. This label reflects India's view on BRICS as neither a rigid organization nor an economic bloc. India has chaired BRICS three times (in 2012, 2016, and 2021), and the period up to around 2016 was when its expectations of BRICS were at their height. In the background were the expansion of bilateral economic ties with China as well as bilateral cooperation on the global agenda. China-India trade grew roughly twentyfold, from \$2.9 billion in 2001 to \$65.8 billion in 2012.³⁷ The year 2012 was designated the “Year of India-China Friendship and Cooperation,” and there was an expectation that the two countries would rise together on the basis of economic interdependence. Building on China-India economic engagement, BRICS achieved establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and agreement on the Contingent Reserve



BRICS Summit (July 2025) (Photo: Prime Ministers Office/Press Inf/Planet Pix via ZUMA Press Wire/Kyodo News Images)

35) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 2008–2009, 129.

36) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report*, 2009–2010, 132.

37) [India] Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Export Import Data Bank, accessed December 5, 2018. See also Jagannath Panda, *India-China Relations: Politics of Resources, Identity and Authority in a Multipolar World Order* (Routledge, 2017), 231.

Arrangement (CRA).³⁸ The declaration of the BRICS Delhi Summit of 2012 explicitly expressed dissatisfaction with delays in the reform of International Monetary Fund (IMF) quotas and put specific demands regarding the appointment of the World Bank president.³⁹ When IMF quotas were revised in 2016, India's voting share rose from 2.3% to 2.6% (China's rose from 3.8% to 6.1%). Indian commentators interpret this IMF reform as a result of pressure exerted through the establishment of the NDB and the CRA.⁴⁰

After the 2017 military crisis between China and India in Doklam, in Bhutanese territory, India heightened its wariness toward China's "Belt and Road Initiative."⁴¹ Then, in June 2020, a military clash in the Galwan Valley left casualties on both sides severely damaged bilateral trust. Even so, hosting the 13th BRICS Summit in September 2021, India rallied BRICS in defense of a United Nations that had become dysfunctional under the pandemic. At the foreign ministers' meeting held online ahead of the summit, a joint statement on "Strengthening and Reforming the Multilateral System" was adopted. The joint statement declared a commitment to multilateralism through international law and to the centrality of the United Nations in the international system. It also touched on points sensitive to BRICS members, including that only the UN Security Council holds the authority to impose sanctions, and that there must be no double standards in promoting international law, democracy, the right to development, and non-interference in internal affairs.⁴² The Delhi Summit declaration (issued online) also prioritized "strengthening and reforming the multilateral system" next only to COVID-19 and global health.⁴³ The direction of reform aspired

38) On the NDB and CRA, see Sekine Eiichi, "Yurashia tairiku ni okeru takokukan no wakugumi no moto de no Chugoku no kinyu kyoryoku doko" [Trends in China's financial cooperation under multilateral frameworks on the Eurasian continent], *Nomura shihon shijo kuotari* [Nomura Capital Market Quarterly], Autumn 2022, <https://www.nicmr.com/nicmr/report/repo/2022/2022aut05.pdf>.

39) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "Fourth BRICS Summit: Delhi Declaration," March 29, 2012, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/19158/>.

40) Rajan Kumar et al., eds., *Locating BRICS in the Global Order: Perspectives from the Global South* (Routledge, 2023), 94.

41) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "Official Spokesperson's Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum," May 13, 2017, <http://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/>.

42) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "BRICS Joint Statement on Strengthening and Reforming the Multilateral System," June 1, 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33888/>.

43) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, "XIII BRICS Summit: New Delhi Declaration," September 9, 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34236/>.

to by BRICS members should be a UN system which “adapts to the realities of today’s world,” or a multilateralism that is “representative” of the international community. As India positions the United Nations as the sole legitimate multilateral institution and derives its status from its role there, India tries to make BRICS a platform for revitalizing the United Nations.

4. Multi-Alignment at the Regional Level: Betting on ASEAN Centrality and Working with Like-Minded Countries

(1) From Look East to Act East: India-ASEAN Cooperation Transformed under China's Expansion

In the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region, India’s multi-alignment presents a different face. Whereas global-level alignment aims at mitigating U.S. unilateralism and balancing between the U.S. and China, the origin of multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific is the Look East policy, a belated participation in ASEAN-centered multilateral institutions in response to the post-Cold War environment.

This section first traces how India’s engagement with ASEAN evolved from economic diplomacy into a strategy for dealing with China. It then examines the maritime security cooperation to understand how India’s alignment with ASEAN has developed alongside and in complement to cooperation with the United States and its regional allies, while ASEAN centrality has become one of the regional norms.

Look East was originally India’s economic diplomacy, but by the late 2000s, researchers and policy-makers were gradually linking Look East with India-China maritime competition.⁴⁴ In one of the earliest comprehensive studies on India-China geopolitical rivalry, China specialist John W. Garver argued that India and China are geopolitically incompatible and inevitably fall into a security dilemma.⁴⁵ Following Garver, Indian scholars based in the United States and the United Kingdom, such as Mohan Malik and Harsh V. Pant, presented their views that Indian and Chinese interests were

44) Walter C. Ladwig III, “Delhi’s Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, ‘Look East,’ and India’s Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific,” *Asian Security* 5, no. 2 (2009).

45) John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (University of Washington Press, 2001).

incompatible in India's neighborhood and "extended neighborhood."⁴⁶

The "extended neighborhood" is a geographical concept imagined and constructed to enable India to expand its strategic horizons; it has been used to refer to Central Asia, the ASEAN states, and the Indian Ocean region.⁴⁷ The concept carries the implication that India cannot expect to achieve economic development if it confines itself to South Asia.

In its 2007 *Maritime Military Strategy*, the Indian Navy identified one of its roles as providing the secure environment necessary for economic development, through which India could occupy "its rightful place in the international community" and fulfill its "manifest destiny."⁴⁸ Such discourse of a great power corresponded to debate in India's strategic community about "restoring India's centrality" or pursuing a "neo-Curzonian strategy."⁴⁹ The ultimate goal was to attain great power status, and the means lay in becoming a hub of connectivity and economic activity, and pursuing a leading role in the region. This strategic concept transformed the character of Look East.

From 2004, India sought to advance the development of its northeastern region, located along the China-India border, in tandem with ASEAN connectivity projects. This, however, securitized the development of border infrastructure. After the Qinghai-Tibet Railway connecting Qinghai Province and Tibet opened in 2006, India responded with the construction of border roads in Arunachal Pradesh. China, in turn, began asserting that Arunachal Pradesh was "South Tibet." As both countries' border infrastructure development fell into a security dilemma, India's connectivity projects took on the character of a strategic response to China's Belt and

46) Mohan Malik, "Eyeing the Dragon: India's China Debate," Special Assessment, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (December 2003); Harsh V. Pant, "Indian Foreign Policy and China," *Strategic Analysis* 30, no. 4 (2006).

47) David Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review* 8, no. 2 (2009); Priya Chacko, "The Rise of the Indo-Pacific: Understanding Ideational Change and Continuity in India's Foreign Policy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 4 (2014); Tamari Kazutoshi, "Indo no fukusoteki chitsujo ninshiki to taigai senryaku" [India's multilayered conception of order and its external strategy], in Sahashi Ryo, ed., *Reisengo no Higashi Ajia chitsujo* [The post-Cold War East Asian order] (Tokyo: Keisoshobo, 2020).

48) [India] Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (2007), iii.

49) George Nathaniel Curzon served as British Foreign Secretary (1919–1924) and Viceroy of India (1889–1905). He advocated the economic integrity of the Indian Empire. On neo-Curzonianism, see Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Random House, 2010), 182–190.

Road Initiative.⁵⁰

Prime Minister Modi, who took office in 2014, declared that he would evolve Look East into Act East, and under the policy banner of Act East, he explicitly advanced multi-alignment in the region.⁵¹ Act East differs from the previous Look East in two respects. First, “capacity-building” was added as a new element alongside “economic partnership” and “connectivity.” Second, the policy embraced a degree of shared norms, emphasizing commitment to ASEAN centrality⁵² and affinity with Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”⁵³ and the U.S. “rebalance.”⁵⁴

Behind the references to “synergy” with the visions on regional order articulated by Japan and the United States lies the fact that India had come to share the value of “freedom and openness.” India had not always interpreted “freedom of navigation” in the same way as the United States. Yet because China applied pressure that appeared to obstruct economic and security cooperation between India and ASEAN member states in the South China Sea, India came to invoke “freedom of navigation” paired with “unimpeded commerce” as a set of norms.⁵⁵ The term “freedom of

50) On border infrastructure development and the security dilemma, see Izuyama Marie, “Minami Ajia ni okeru Chugoku, Indo no kyoso: Boda, renketsusei, seiryokuken” [Border, connectivity, and spheres of influence: India-China competition in South Asia], *Kokusai mondai* [International Affairs], no. 669 (March 2018).

51) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Prime Minister’s Remarks at the 9th East Asia Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar,” November 13, 2014, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24238/>. For a detailed discussion on the Act East policy, see Izuyama Marie, “Indo no chiikishugi gaiko ni okeru Chugoku yoin: Akuto Isuto o chushin ni” [Act East: The China factor in India’s diplomacy in the region], in Takenaka Harukata, ed., *“Kyokoku” Chugoku to taiji suru Indo Taiheiyō shokoku* [Indo-Pacific Nations facing China aspiring to be a “Great County”] (Tokyo: Chikurashobo, 2022).

52) India’s support for “ASEAN centrality” was first mentioned at the India-ASEAN Summit held in September 2016. “Chairman’s Statement of the 14th ASEAN-India Summit, September 8, 2016, Vientiane, Lao PDR ‘Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic ASEAN Community,’” <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Chairmans-Statement-of-the-14th-ASEAN-India-Summit-Final.pdf.pdf>.

53) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-India Joint Statement,” November 11, 2016, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000202950.pdf>.

54) [U.S.] White House, “U.S.-India Joint Statement ‘Shared Effort; Progress for All,’” January 25, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-statement-shared-effort-progress-all>.

55) Izuyama Marie, “Kokuren kaiyōho joyaku to Indo: ‘Kokokoku no jiyū’ to engankoku no anzen hoshō riei no aidā” [Between “freedom of navigation” and coastal states’ security: India and UNCLOS], *Anzen hoshō senryaku kenkyū* [Security and Strategy] 1, no. 2 (October 2020): 94-95.

navigation” appeared for the first time in the Indian Navy’s *Maritime Security Strategy* released in 2015.⁵⁶

(2) Multiple Strategic Partnerships with ASEAN Member States

India has strategic partnership agreements with five ASEAN member states. In order of the year of signing, these are Indonesia (2005), Vietnam (2007), Malaysia (2010), Singapore (2015), and the Philippines (2025). One notable pattern is that India established strategic partnerships earlier with countries pursuing non-alignment policies (Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia). Partnerships with these countries also imply defense cooperation within Russian-origin equipment systems: India had provided know-how for maintenance and training related to Russian equipment. By contrast, India established partnerships only recently with U.S. allies and quasi-allies (Singapore and the Philippines). It is somewhat surprising that the partnership with Singapore came relatively later, given Singapore’s role as a bridge between India and ASEAN and its initiative in stepping up bilateral naval exercises. This is likely because Singapore itself did not, until recently, attach much importance to having a formal strategic partnership. Defense cooperation with Singapore has served not only as a junction between India and ASEAN but also as a facilitator to incorporate India into U.S.-led multilateral naval cooperation in the region.

By contrast, the strategic partnerships with Vietnam and the Philippines bear closely on the South China Sea issue. China issued clear warnings against the joint development of resources in the South China Sea by India and Vietnam, and against the supply of Indian naval equipment to Vietnam, both of which accelerated after the conclusion of the strategic partnership.⁵⁷ After China’s intimidation, India’s stake in the South China Sea rose. At the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial meeting held in Phnom Penh in July 2012, External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna expressed support, for the first time, for “freedom of navigation and access to resources” in connection with developments in the South China Sea.⁵⁸ India’s commitment to “freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce” was incorporated into the Japan-

56) [India] Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 5-6.

57) National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2017*, English edition (2017), 50.

58) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “External Affairs Minister’s Intervention on ‘Exchange of views on Regional and International Issues’ at the 19th ARF Ministerial Meeting,” July 12, 2012; the link is currently broken.

India joint statement of 2013.⁵⁹ The U.S.-India joint statement of 2014 went further, advocating “freedom of navigation and overflight, especially in the South China Sea.”⁶⁰

India has also voiced support for the Philippines’ submission of South China Sea arbitration.⁶¹ On the day the arbitral tribunal awarded its decision in July 2016, India’s Ministry of External Affairs issued an unusual statement that it “noted” the award, supporting “freedom of navigation and over flight, and unimpeded commerce,” and stating that “states should resolve disputes through peaceful means without threat or use of force.”⁶² India’s tacit support for the Philippines with regard to the arbitration propelled a rapid rapprochement between India and the Philippines. In November 2017, the two countries concluded a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the defense industry and logistics, and in 2022 a contract was signed for the transfer of missiles from India to the Philippines.⁶³ The missiles in question are BrahMos missiles, jointly developed and produced by India and Russia. Although the Philippines had been one of the ASEAN countries most distant from India, the South China Sea issue drew the two together, leading into India’s first export of BrahMos.



Indian destroyer armed with BrahMos missiles, berthed at the Port of Manila (August 2025) (AFP / Jiji Press)

59) [Japan] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Statement: Strengthening the Strategic and Global Partnership between Japan and India beyond the 60th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations,” May 29, 2013, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000005381.pdf>.

60) [U.S.] White House, “U.S.-India Joint Statement,” September 30, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>.

61) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Statement: Third India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation,” October 14, 2015, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25930/>.

62) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Statement on Award of Arbitral Tribunal on South China Sea under Annexure VII of UNCLOS,” July 12, 2016, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/27019/>.

63) Kojiro Tonosaki, “Brahmos in the Philippines and Quad Potential,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS, June 21, 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/brahmos-in-the-philippines-and-quad-potential/>; Dinakar Peri, “India Delivers First Batch of BrahMos to Philippines,” *Hindu*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-delivers-first-batch-of-brahmos-to-philippines/article68084161.ece>.

(3) Strengthening Maritime Security Cooperation

There is no doubt that China's offensive in the South China Sea has spurred maritime security cooperation between India and various ASEAN countries, but it is also worth noting that multiple and diverse pre-existing formats of cooperation provided the foundation.

First, the most solid pillar of cooperation has been the bilateral naval exercise with Singapore. The Singaporean and Indian navies conducted their first joint exercise in 1994.⁶⁴ In February 1998 the two countries held another bilateral exercise, and following an exercise off Kochi, India, in March 1999, the exercises were institutionalized as an annual event under the code name SIMBEX. Singapore deployed three or more vessels from the outset, and in 2004 each country deployed four vessels. Indian submarines also participated, and the exercises were planned for anti-submarine warfare.⁶⁵ The regularization of SIMBEX also relates to progress in U.S.-India naval cooperation. The U.S.-India joint exercise had begun earlier, in 1992, but the United States suspended military cooperation following India's 1998 nuclear tests, after which the joint exercise with Singapore was institutionalized prior to that with the U.S. After the U.S.-India joint exercise resumed in 2002 as Malabar, exercises with both Singapore and the United States came to constitute India's two pillars of its operation-oriented exercises. Experience gained through naval exercises with Singapore helped ease India's hesitance to participate in the Pacific Reach (Western Pacific Submarine Rescue Exercise) and Western Pacific Mine Countermeasures Exercise during the 2000s.

The second pillar consists of joint patrols with Indonesia and Thailand, the maritime neighbors with which India shares maritime boundaries (Table 1). The India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT) has been conducted biannually since 2002 and held its 44th iteration in July 2025. The patrol runs along the international maritime boundary, from Port Blair on India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands to an Indonesian port (Sabang in recent years). The stated purpose is "keeping this vital part of the IOR safe and secure for commercial shipping, international trade and conduct of legitimate maritime activities," but the more local and pressing common interests at stake are the prevention of illegal fishing,

64) [India] Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report*, 1994-1995, 16.

65) [India] Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report*, 2004-2005, 49.

drug smuggling, maritime terrorism, and piracy.⁶⁶ These are unglamorous efforts, but they have helped build trust between the two navies. The India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol has likewise been conducted biannually since 2005 and held its 40th iteration in November 2025. In December 2023, the first bilateral naval exercise was held alongside the 36th India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol.

Building on these foundations, naval cooperation between India and ASEAN countries was upgraded another notch from 2018 (Table 2). This is presumed to be the result of an Indian initiative, given that India hosted the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit marking the 25th anniversary of India-ASEAN dialogue relations. On January 26, 2018, India invited the leaders of all ASEAN member states as chief guests on Republic Day, an extraordinary gesture of hospitality. At the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit held the previous day, India's strong commitment was affirmed regarding ASEAN centrality, freedom of navigation and overflight, lawful use of the seas and freedom of commerce, peaceful resolution of disputes based on international law, and the strengthening of maritime cooperation.⁶⁷

In November 2018, the first bilateral naval exercise with Indonesia was held in Surabaya.⁶⁸ Subsequently held biennially under the name Samudra Shakti, it reached its fifth iteration in October 2025 in Visakhapatnam, India.⁶⁹ Slightly later, in September 2019, a bilateral naval exercise with Malaysia was launched as Samudra Laksamana, with the third iteration held in Visakhapatnam in February-March 2024.⁷⁰

In his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Modi previewed that India would “start a new tri-lateral exercise with Singapore soon.” This took shape as the Singapore-India-Thailand exercise SITMEX, held in September 2019, with the harbor phase at Port Blair on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the sea phase in the Andaman

66) [India] Ministry of Defence, “39th Edition of India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol,” December 11, 2022, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1882468®=3&lang=2>.

67) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Delhi Declaration of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit to Mark the 25th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations,” January 25, 2018, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29386/>.

68) [India] Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report*, 2018–2019, 33.

69) “India-Indonesia Joint Maritime Exercise at Visakhapatnam from Oct 14-17,” *Print*, October 15, 2025, <https://theprint.in/india/india-indonesia-joint-maritime-exercise-at-visakhapatnam-from-oct-14-17/2764459/>.

70) [India] Ministry of Defence, “India-Malaysia Bilateral Maritime Exercise Samudra Laksamana,” March 1, 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2010643®=3&lang=2>.

Sea.⁷¹ In November 2025, the fifth iteration was held at Changi port, with the Singaporean side emphasizing the like-mindedness of the three navies.⁷²

Table 1. Long-Standing India-ASEAN Cooperation at Sea (as of December 2025)

	Overview	Year Started	Most Recent Iteration
India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT)	Coordinated patrol twice a year along the international maritime boundary, from Port Blair (Andaman and Nicobar Islands) to an Indonesian port.	2002	July 2025 (44th)
India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Indo-Thai CORPAT)	Coordinated patrol twice a year along the international maritime boundary, from Port Blair (Andaman and Nicobar Islands) to a Thai port.	2005	November 2025 (40th)
Singapore-India Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX)	Held annually, hosted alternately by Singapore and India.	1994	July 2025 (32nd)

Table 2. India-ASEAN Maritime Exercises Inaugurated since 2018 (as of December 2025)

	First Iteration / Host	Subsequent Iterations
India-Indonesia Bilateral Exercise (Samudra Shakti)	November 2018 Indonesia	November 2019 September 2021 May 2023 October 2025
India-Malaysia Bilateral Exercise (Samudra Laksamana)	September 2019 Unknown	February 2024 / India (3rd)
Singapore-India-Thailand Trilateral Exercise (SITMEX)	September 20, 2019 India	November 2020 / Singapore November 2021 / Thailand November 2024 / India November 2025 / Singapore
ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise	May 2–8, 2023 Co-hosted by India and Singapore.	None to date
India-Indonesia-Australia Trilateral Exercise	September 20–21, 2023 Host country and exercise area not announced.	None to date

Note: Mutual participation in multilateral exercises hosted by India or ASEAN member states is excluded.

Source: Compiled by the author from Ministry of External Affairs, India, *Annual Report*; Ministry of Defence, India, press releases; and Ministry of Defence, Singapore, press releases.

71) [Singapore] Ministry of Defence, “Singapore, India and Thailand Participate in Inaugural Trilateral Maritime Exercise,” September 16, 2019, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/16sep19_nr/.

72) [Singapore] Ministry of Defence, “Singapore, India and Thailand Conclude Trilateral Maritime Exercise, Reaffirming Long-Standing Defence Relations,” November 29, 2025, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/29nov25-nr/>.

(4) India as a Like-Minded Partner

Commemorating 10 years of strategic partnership, India and ASEAN upgraded their strategic partnership to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” in 2022.⁷³ The foundation cited is a regional architecture grounded in the UN Charter, the ASEAN Charter, and ASEAN centrality, with no mention whatsoever of a “multipolar world.” The focus falls instead on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and maritime security.

In May 2023, India and Singapore co-hosted the first ASEAN-India maritime exercise in Changi port and the South China Sea. About 1,400 personnel from the navies of all ASEAN member states except Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar participated. The press release from India's Ministry of Defence emphasized that both the Indian destroyer and the frigate participating in the exercise were indigenously designed and manufactured, showcasing the capability of the Indian defense industry.⁷⁴ Some Indian researchers pointed at a message directed at China, referring to reports that Chinese maritime militia were observed in the zone of maritime exercise.⁷⁵ In September 2023, the first India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral exercise was held.⁷⁶ India is skillfully leveraging its cooperation with Singapore and Indonesia and is shifting its cooperation in the region toward one based on “like-mindedness” while continuing to disavow alliances.

In November 2025, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, attending the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) held in Malaysia, stated in his speech that ADMM-Plus was inseparable from India's Act East policy and praised the steady progress ADMM-Plus has made in evolving from a dialogue platform into a framework for defense cooperation.⁷⁷

73) [India] Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Statement on ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” November 12, 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?ddl/35876/>.

74) [India] Ministry of Defence, “Sea Phase of ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise: 2023,” May 9, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1922815>.

75) Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India, ASEAN Hold First Maritime Exercises,” *Diplomat*, May 13, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/india-asean-hold-first-maritime-exercises/>.

76) [India] Ministry of Defence, “Indian Naval Ship Sahyadri Participates in the Maiden India-Indonesia-Australia Trilateral Maritime Exercise,” September 22, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1959717>. The press release does not specify the exercise area.

77) “Rajnath Singh Praises ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meet as Linchpin of India's Vision,” *India Today*, November 1, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/rajnath-singh-praises-asean-defence-ministers-meet-as-linchpin-of-india-vision-2811794-2025-11-01>.

ADMM-Plus also provides India with a venue for advancing defense equipment cooperation with various countries. Although U.S.-India relations are strained over tariffs and the question of mediation between India and Pakistan, on October 31, on the sidelines of the meeting, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh held talks with U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, and the two signed a ten-year “Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defence Partnership.”⁷⁸ Defence Minister Rajnath Singh also held bilateral meetings with the defense ministers of New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam. With New Zealand and the Republic of Korea, with whom he had also held bilateral meetings at the previous year’s ADMM-Plus, and with Australia, which he visited in October 2025, defense equipment cooperation was the central item on the agenda. India’s pursuit of multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific suggests that defense equipment and the defense industry are emerging as new pillars of the agenda.

Conclusion

India’s multi-alignment at the global level, or its alignments in pursuit of a multipolar world, takes two formats. The first is the building of strategic partnerships. These take many forms, ranging from older partnerships designed to secure strategic autonomy by distancing India from U.S. unilateralism, to more recent partnerships that engage with all sides of the great power competition including U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia rivalries. All of them can be seen as extensions of non-alignment policy in that they balance each bilateral relation with great powers. In the case of partnerships with ASEAN states, those with non-aligned states were concluded earlier. India has labored to balance between the United States and China since around 2017, and after the war in Ukraine, between the United States and Russia, but the very fact of doing so has displeased the United States. The second format is participation in a wide variety of multilateral institutions and forums, some of which appear, at times, to be mutually contradictory. To take the example of BRICS, the forum India has valued most in recent years, it is a platform for reforming global governance that would reflect the “multipolarity” that has already become a reality, by some indicators such as gross domestic

78) Released on Defence Minister Singh’s official page. “Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh & US Secretary of War Meet on the Margins of 12th ADMM-Plus in Kuala Lumpur,” October 31, 2025, <https://www.rajnathsingh.in/press-release/raksha-mantri-rajnath-singh-us-secretary-of-war-meet-on-the-margins-of-12th-admm-plus-in-kuala-lumpur/>.

product (GDP). India's foremost objectives of BRICS cooperation have been reform of the international financial order dominated by the United States and Europe, and reform of the UN Security Council. Indeed, BRICS has, to a degree, functioned as a pressure group for reforming the IMF and the World Bank. Yet India seems to define BRICS as an inner circle of the G20 with the goal to be treated as an equal negotiating partner by the G7. Apart from the upholding of UN legitimacy, India has not been keen to push a security agenda within BRICS, which might potentially divide the South and the West. So it cannot be concluded that India is aiming at building a parallel order that would counter the West-led order. On the contrary, concerned that the geopolitics of U.S.-China rivalry would creep into BRICS, India has repeatedly conveyed since around 2017 that BRICS is "not anti-Western." Despite this, the second Trump administration, viewing China and Russia as adversaries on issues of tariffs and the role of dollars as key currencies, has come to perceive that BRICS will destroy the dollar, and has begun to view India's cooperation with China within BRICS as problematic, and even India's invocation of a "multipolar world."

In the Indo-Pacific, by contrast, India refrains from invoking a "multipolar world," respects ASEAN centrality, and behaves as a like-minded partner. This stems from the imperative of preventing "regional unipolarity," that is, Chinese hegemony in Asia. Because India has built relations with ASEAN taking care of sovereign equality as well as each member's sensitivity and aspiration, multi-alignment in the region centered on maritime security is deepening relatively smoothly. Should U.S. commitment to the region temporarily decline, India's multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific can serve as a valuable asset, whether for sustaining the inherited existing order or for modifying it gradually and moderately. If India could also build a web of multi-alignment in the regional economy and supply chain, it would become an additional driver of pluralization in the region.

Index

Subjects

Act East policy 237, 243
America First ii, 13, 26, 30–33, 35,
37, 39–46, 51–52, 55, 57–62, 172,
184, 203
artificial intelligence (AI) 7, 18, 161,
163, 166, 169–170, 178–179, 183
ASEAN centrality iii, 195–197, 202,
213, 218, 235, 237, 241, 243, 245
ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting
(ADMM), ADMM-Plus 135,
194–195, 197, 243–244
ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
(AOIP) 197
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) 110,
193–194, 238
Association of Southeast Asian Nations
(ASEAN) iii, 4, 110, 112, 116, 129,
135, 152–156, 175, 186–204,
208–209, 213, 215, 217–219,
235–245
AUKUS ii, 8, 123, 160–166, 168–172,
178, 183–184, 213
Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations
(AUSMIN) 103, 171
Belt and Road Initiative 64, 78, 80,
88–89, 114, 151, 198–199, 234
bipolar structure, bipolarity i, 2–6, 10,
14–15, 22, 27, 47–49, 62, 84
BrahMos 239
BRICS 7, 9, 11, 64, 71–73, 81, 86,
89, 212, 214, 216, 222–224, 230,
232–235, 244–245

burden sharing, burden-sharing 12,
35, 38, 42, 58–59, 62, 171, 184
capacity-building assistance, capacity-
building support 19–20, 97–98,
105–106, 117, 126–127, 129, 237
clean energy 160, 177–178, 181, 184
Cold War i, 2, 6, 9–11, 32, 34, 36,
40, 47, 49, 55, 60, 68, 79, 83–84, 96,
108–110, 112, 136–137, 146–149,
157, 161–162, 167, 169, 186,
188–189, 193, 195–196, 199, 218,
228–229
COVID-19 pandemic 30, 50, 52,
56–58, 82, 114, 173, 199, 202–203,
234
decoupling, de-risking 10–11, 184,
187, 229
defense industry 8, 160, 162,
164–165, 168, 170, 172, 177,
183–184, 239, 243–244
East Asia Summit (EAS) 194, 197,
201–203
East China Sea 8, 19, 54–55, 75, 93,
96, 100–102, 104, 106–107, 114,
120, 122
economic security ii, 11, 160–163,
173–174, 177–179, 182–184
energy security 155, 161, 177, 194
Five Eyes 164
Free and Open Indo-Pacific
(FOIP) 116, 135, 153–154, 196,
207, 223, 237
freedom of navigation 101, 112,
114, 117, 122, 148, 196–197, 205,
237–239, 241

- Future Made in Australia (FMA) 177
 G20 140, 202, 231–233, 245
 G7 102, 137, 212, 231–232, 245
 global financial crisis 50, 231
 global governance 7, 67–69, 74, 81, 230, 244
 Global Initiatives 64, 67–69, 83
 Global South ii, 7–8, 11–12, 64–67, 69, 71–74, 78, 80, 82–87, 89–90, 145
 hedging iii, 12, 21, 136, 186, 188, 196–198, 204, 211–213, 217–218, 225
 IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) 25, 37, 101, 116, 120, 203, 227, 241
 India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA) 232
 India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT) 240, 242
 International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) 167–170
 isolationism 30, 35–36, 43–45, 53
 Kargil conflict, Kargil crisis 229
 liberal international order 34, 37, 43, 58, 61, 224, 232
 like-minded partners, like-minded countries, like-mindedness, like-minded country ii, 88, 92, 95–97, 101–102, 105–107, 109, 112–113, 119, 121–123, 125–127, 129–130, 162, 222–223, 235, 242–243, 245
 Look East policy 235–237
 Malabar 118, 223, 240
 middle power ii, 134, 136–142, 144–145, 150, 152, 154–158, 173
 Minilateralism ii, 8–9, 17, 20, 22, 26, 92, 94–97, 130, 152, 162, 213
 multi-alignment iii, 21, 222–225, 227, 232, 235, 237, 244–245
 multilateralism 9, 69, 80, 145, 187–188, 193, 196, 201–203, 208, 216, 218–219, 234–235
 Multipolarity, multipolarization, Multipolar World, multipolar structure iii, 2, 5, 7, 15, 17, 48, 73, 80, 84, 222–227, 232, 243–245
 National Technology and Industrial Base (NTIB) 167, 170
 New Development Bank (NDB) 233–234
 non-alignment, non-aligned 21, 66, 76, 186, 190, 204, 208–209, 212, 217–218, 232, 238, 244
 Non-traditional security 8, 68, 100, 110–112, 115, 119, 134, 136, 139, 145, 150, 154–155, 157, 194–195
 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 6, 9–10, 34, 42, 156, 226
 nuclear cooperation 226, 230–231
 nuclear-powered submarines 8, 160, 162–164, 166, 171–172, 183
 nuclear test 150, 226, 229, 240
 Official Security Assistance (OSA) 19, 127
 Pacific island nations, Pacific Island countries, Pacific Islands 19, 70, 156, 184
 partnerships, partnership diplomacy 8, 15, 17, 19, 21–22, 26, 59–60, 64–67, 70–71, 77, 79–81, 86, 89, 101, 112, 116, 122, 125, 148, 156, 161–162, 164, 171, 175, 178, 183–184, 189, 201–202, 206, 208–213, 222, 225–230, 237–238, 243–244

- p pluralization i, ii, iii, 3, 6, 15–18,
-
- 20–24, 26–27, 31, 59, 64, 66, 87, 90,
-
- 97, 130, 135, 160–163, 173, 183–184,
-
- 186, 188, 196, 204, 207–209, 212,
-
- 214, 217–218, 245
-
- post-Cold War iii, 4, 37, 100, 148–
-
- 149, 157, 186, 188, 193, 196, 218,
-
- 235
-
- protectionism 44–45, 58, 80, 153
-
- Quad 20, 213, 223
-
- rebalance, rebalancing 10, 37–38, 75,
-
- 212, 237
-
- rule of law 69, 101, 116, 147,
-
- 155–156, 188, 225
-
- Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral
-
- foreign ministers' meeting 227, 232
-
- Russo-Ukrainian War, Russia's invasion
-
- of Ukraine 23, 38, 57, 82, 203,
-
- 223, 244
-
- security dilemma 38–39, 61–62, 191,
-
- 235–237
-
- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
-
- (SCO) 7, 9, 11, 64, 69, 71, 73–74,
-
- 77, 86–89, 223, 233
-
- SIMBEX 240, 242
-
- South China Sea 8, 19, 21, 55, 75,
-
- 93, 96, 98, 100–107, 109–117, 120,
-
- 122–126, 143–144, 147, 156, 161,
-
- 187, 193, 196–201, 203–207,
-
- 209–210, 215, 237–240, 243
-
- South China Sea Arbitration 124, 239
-
- Squad, Japan-U.S.-Australia-
-
- Philippines ii, 8, 19, 21, 92–97,
-
- 113, 117–118, 121–123, 125–126,
-
- 129–131, 135, 207
-
- strategic autonomy 17, 20, 219,
-
- 223–225, 227–228, 244
-
- strategic partnership 70, 101, 112,
-
- 125, 202, 206, 208–211, 222,
-
- 225–228, 230, 238, 243–244
-
- supply chains 86, 160, 162, 164–165,
-
- 172, 176–178, 182–183, 211, 245
-
- Taiwan 54, 103–104, 107, 124, 126,
-
- 147, 156, 172, 179–180, 192, 203,
-
- 205
-
- Taiwan contingency 2, 37, 54, 171
-
- tariffs 34, 39, 41, 44, 62, 82, 160,
-
- 174, 181–182, 184, 188, 198, 203,
-
- 207, 211, 213, 215–217, 223–224,
-
- 244–245
-
- theory of intermediate zones 84, 86
-
- trade diversification 160, 162,
-
- 174–176, 179, 183–184
-
- transactional approach 13, 26, 39
-
- unilateralism 222, 227, 235, 244
-
- unipolar, unipolarity 5, 36, 47–48, 80,
-
- 226–227, 245
-
- United Nations 69, 102, 145–148,
-
- 192, 222, 226–227, 234–235
-
- U.S.-China rivalry i, iii, 3, 7, 11, 16,
-
- 18, 21, 23, 25, 27, 64–65, 76–77,
-
- 82, 84, 86, 88, 90, 107, 109, 130,
-
- 135–136, 142–144, 151, 157,
-
- 161, 172–174, 182, 184, 186–188,
-
- 199, 202–204, 209, 211, 218, 228,
-
- 244–245
-
- Virginia-class 171–172
-
- weaponization of
-
- interdependence 161, 173
-
- World Trade Organization (WTO) 39,
-
- 69, 188
-
- World War I 44–45
-
- World War II 34, 43, 60–61, 107, 161
-
- Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality
-
- (ZOPFAN) 192, 196

Names

- Abbott, Tony 182
- Abe Shinzo 95–97, 101–102, 113, 116, 123
- Albanese, Anthony 123, 206
- Aquino, Benigno 99, 101–102, 104–105
- Biden, Joseph 14, 38, 50, 201–202, 205, 210
- Bush, George W. 34, 37, 230
- Campbell, Kurt 50
- Carr, Bob 113
- Chirac, Jacques 226
- Cho Tae-yul 145
- Clinton, Bill 16, 34, 228–229
- Colby, Elbridge 37, 170
- Deng Xiaoping 55, 65, 85
- Doshi, Rush 50, 66, 84, 86–87, 89
- Duterte, Rodrigo 23, 102–105, 206
- Gillard, Julia 112–113
- Hegseth, Pete 25, 37, 203, 207, 244
- Heng Samrin 192
- Hollande, François 122
- Howard, John 110
- Hu Jintao 85
- Hun Manet 215
- Hun Sen 214
- Ibrahim, Anwar 215–216
- Jaishankar, Subrahmanyam 224–226, 232
- Jiang Zemin 85
- Kim Jong Un 7, 88
- Lee Jae-myung 126, 148
- Lee Myung-bak 139–141
- Li Qiang 216
- Mao Zedong 84, 189
- Marcos, Ferdinand 20, 23, 106–107, 121, 125, 205–208
- Modi, Narendra 9, 225, 227, 237, 241
- Mohamad, Mahathir 215
- Moon Jae-in 145, 151–155
- Morrison, Scott 123, 173
- Nakatani Gen 121
- Obama, Barack 37–38, 56, 75, 104, 143, 182, 202
- O'Brien, Robert 45
- Park Geun-hye 140–145, 149–151
- Prabowo Subianto 212–213
- Putin, Vladimir 7, 88, 150, 212, 216, 226
- Roh Tae-woo 148
- Roosevelt, Franklin 44–45
- Rubio, Marco 33
- Rudd, Kevin 113
- Salamat, Emmanuel 103
- Shambaugh, David 66, 85
- Sharif, Nawaz 229
- Singh, Jaswant 229
- Singh, Manmohan 230
- Singh, Rajnath 243–244
- Suharto 189
- Sukarno 189
- Talbott, Strobe 229
- To Lam 211
- Trump, Donald 10, 12, 14, 30–33, 35–43, 45–46, 50–53, 55–62, 80, 82, 129, 153–155, 160, 171, 174, 182, 184, 187–188, 196, 201–202, 207–208, 211, 213–217, 223–224, 245
- Vajpayee, Atal Bihari 226, 229
- Vance, JD 38
- Wang Jisi 77–78
- Wang Yi 72, 81–82

Wilson, Woodrow 43–44
Xi Jinping 11, 55, 64–65, 67–70,
72, 74–75, 78–82, 84–85, 89, 150,
210–212, 214, 216
Yoon Suk Yeol 20, 124–125, 145–147,
155–156, 158
Yun Byung-se 141, 143, 149

Editor and Contributors

(Position titles are as of June 2026)

Editor

ISHIHARA Yusuke [Introduction, Chapter 3]

Senior Fellow, Defense Policy Division, Department of Policy Studies, NIDS

PhD, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University

Areas of Expertise: International relations in the Asia-Pacific, history of Japanese and Asia-Pacific security

<Major Publications>

“Futatsu no Nikuson shokku to ‘sengo bagen’: Haken henyoki Nihon no sekinin” [The Two Nixon Shocks and the “Postwar Bargains”: Japan’s Responsibility in the Period of Hegemonic Transformation], *Kokusai Seiji* [International Politics] (March 2026); “Revisiting the “Cap-in-the-Bottle” Thesis: Negotiations and Disagreements among Japan, China, and the U.S. in the early 1970s,” *Security and Strategy* vol. 4, (January 2024); *Strategic Diplomacy: The Japan Case*, Country Report for the Project on “Strategic Diplomacy for 21st Century Defence and Statecraft,” (Australian National University, November 2023); “Japan and the Origin of ASEAN Centrality,” *Journal of Law, Politics, and Sociology*, vol. 94, no. 2 (February 2021).

Contributors

MAEDA Yuji [Chapter 1]

Research Fellow, Defense Policy Division, Policy Studies Department, NIDS

PhD candidate, University of Virginia

Areas of Expertise: International relations theory, security studies, U.S.-China relations

<Major Publications>

“Gendaisen to kaku no kage: Ukuraina senso to Taiwan yuji ni okeru kaku no tate ni kansuru hikaku kosatsu” [Modern Warfare and the Nuclear Shadow: A Comparative Study of the Nuclear Shield in the Russo-Ukrainian War and a Taiwan Contingency], in “*Aratanaru senso*” no shoso: *Ukuraina senso no kyokun to Bei-Chu taiji no yukue* [War with New and Old Characteristics: Lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War and Prospects for the U.S.-China Confrontation], eds. Kikuchi Shigeo and Sugiura Yasuyuki (Tokyo: Interbooks/NIDS, 2025); “Daisenryaku no hyoryu: Reisen go Amerika no daisenryaku to taichu seisaku” [Grand strategy adrift: Post-Cold War U.S. grand strategy and policy toward China], in *Biden no Amerika: Sono seikaikan to gaiko* [Joe Biden’s Foreign Policy and His Vision], eds. Sahashi Ryo and Suzuki Kazuto (Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai [University of Tokyo Press], 2022); “Chiseigaku no saiko: Chiseigaku to beikoku no Taiwan boei komittomento” [Geopolitics revisited: A geopolitical model and the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan], *Anzenhosho Senryaku Kenkyu* [Security & Strategy] 1, no. 2 (October 2020).

YAMAGUCHI Shinji [Chapter 2]

Senior Fellow, China Division, Department of Area Studies, NIDS

PhD in Political Science, Faculty of Law, Department of Politics, Keio University

Areas of Expertise: Chinese politics and security policy, East Asian security policy, contemporary Chinese history

<Major Publications>

Mo Takuto no kyokokuka senryaku 1949-1976 [Mao Zedong's strategy for becoming a great power, 1949-1976] (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2021); "China's Diplomacy in Central Asia: The Logic of Internal Politics Coupled with the Logic of Great Power Competition," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, Vol.14, Issue 2 (January 2026); "Toranpu 2.0 to taiji suru Chugoku" [China Confronting Trump 2.0] in *Toranpu no Amerika: Naisei to gaiko, soshite sekai* [America Under Trump: Divided at Home, Watched by the World], eds. Sahashi Ryo and Umekawa Takeshi (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Press, 2025).

ISHIDA Tomonori [Chapter 4]

Senior Fellow, International Conflict Division, Center for Military History, NIDS

PhD candidate, Keio University

Areas of Expertise: History of Japan-U.S.-ROK relations, security in the Korean Peninsula

<Major Publications>

"Beigun kichi ga tsunagu Nihon to Kankoku: Chosen hanto yuji to 'Nichi-Bei-Kan' anpo renkei'" [Japan and the ROK as connected by U.S. military bases: Japan-U.S.-ROK security ties in a Korean contingency], in *Kankoku to tsunagaru* [How does Japan redefine what Korea means?], ed. Asaba Yuki (Tokyo: Yuhikaku 2024); "Base Politics within the Framework of the U.S.-ROK Alliance Management Scheme," in *Exploring Base Politics: How Host Countries Shape the Network of U.S. Overseas Bases*, ed. Shinji Kawana and Minoru Takahashi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); "Japan's Economic Assistance to the Republic of Korea, 1977-1981: An Analysis within the Framework of the US-Japan Security Burden-sharing Scheme," *World Political Science* 11, no. 2 (2015).

SATAKE Tomohiko [Chapter 5]

Professor, School of International Politics, Economics and Communication (SIPEC), Aoyama Gakuin University

PhD (International Relations), The Australian National University

Areas of Expertise: Alliance studies, Asia-Pacific security, Japan-U.S.-Australia security cooperation

<Major Publications>

"Nichigo no anzen hosho kyoryoku: 'kyori no sensei' wo koete" [Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Beyond the "Tyranny of Distance"], (Keiso Shobo, 2022); "The End of Western Superiority: Japan's Threat Perceptions During and After the Cold War," in *The Role of Threat Perceptions in International Relations: Analysing China's Rise in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Vindu Mai Chotani (Routledge India, 2025); "Taikokukan kyoso no naka no Goshu: Domei to chiiki no hazama de" [Australia in an Era of Great Power Competition Navigating the Middle Ground between the Alliance and the Region], in *Taikokukan kyoso no shin jotai* [The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition], ed. Masuda Masayuki (Tokyo: Interbooks/NIDS, 2025).

SHOJI Tomotaka [Chapter 6]

Director, Department of Area Studies, NIDS

PhD in International Relations, University of Tokyo

Areas of Expertise: Security in Southeast Asia (particularly Vietnam), Japan-ASEAN security cooperation

<Major Publications>

“Minamisinakai mondai to Maresia: Tairitsu no kaihi to onbin na taio” [The South China Sea Issue and Malaysia: Avoiding Rivalry and a Measured Response], *NIDS Research & Analysis* 1 (August 2025); “Vietnam no ‘take gaiko’: Taikokukan kyoso de no seizon senryaku” [Vietnam’s “Bamboo Diplomacy”: A Survival Strategy amid Great Power Competition], *Anzen Hoshō Senryaku Kenkyū* [Security and Strategy] 5, no. 2 (March 2025); “Japan’s Security Cooperation with ASEAN: Traditional Ties, New Developments,” *East Asian Policy*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Jul/Sep 2024).

IZUYAMA Marie [Chapter 7]

Senior Fellow, Asia and Africa Division, Department of Area Studies, NIDS

M.A., Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo

Areas of Expertise: India’s foreign and security policy, Japan-India relations

<Major Publications>

“Indo no chiikishugi gaiko ni okeru Chugoku yoin: Akuto Isuto o chushin ni” [The China factor in India’s regionalist diplomacy: Focusing on Act East], in “*Kyōkoku*” *Chugoku to taiji suru Indo Taiheiyō shokoku* [Indo-Pacific Countries Confronting “Great Power” China] ed. Takenaka Harukata (Tokyo: Chikurashobo, 2022); “Not a Substitute for China? Japan’s Perspective of India as a Prospective Partner in Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations*, 2nd ed., eds. Kanti Bajpai, et al. (Routledge, 2026).

ISBN 978-4-86482-170-4

Printed in Japan

