

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.

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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

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