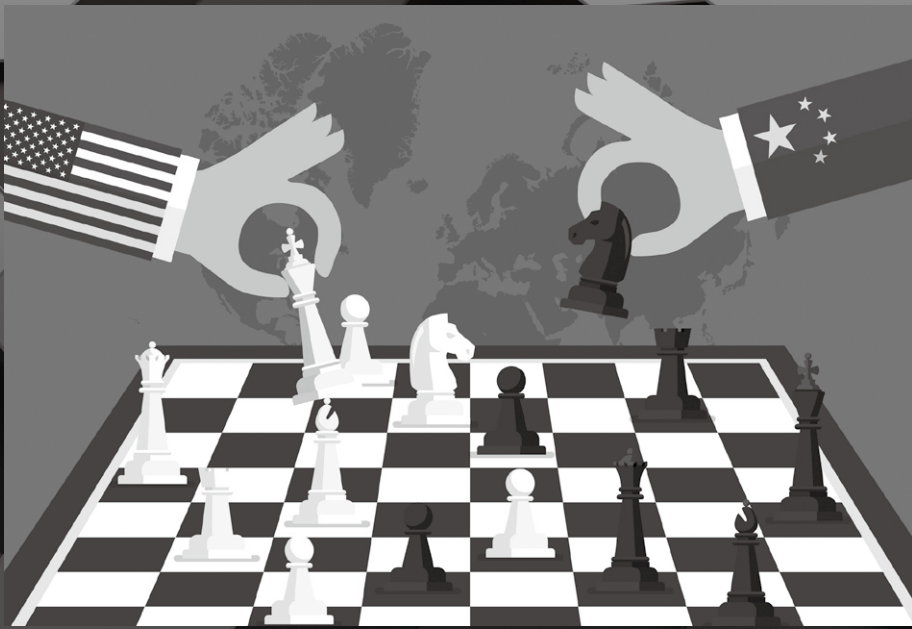




The Competitive Pluralization in the Indo-Pacific

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

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- 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. Fieser, *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 Geostructural 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.

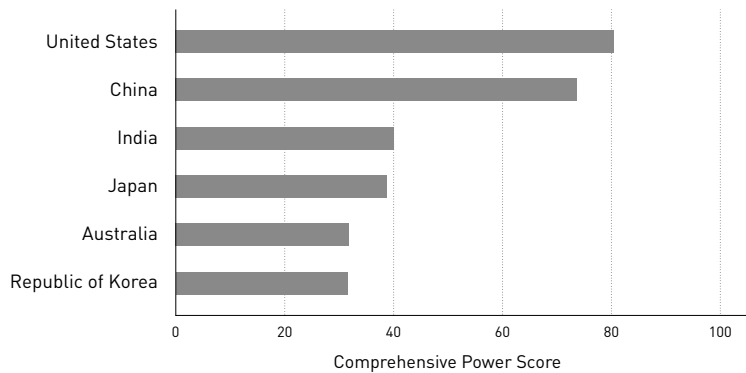
The chapter is organized into three sections. Section 1 observes that while factors conducive to bloc formation certainly exist in the contemporary Indo-Pacific, a clear pattern of inter-bloc rivalry has not yet emerged. Section 2 conceptualizes as the “competitive pluralization” those dynamics of Indo-Pacific 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.

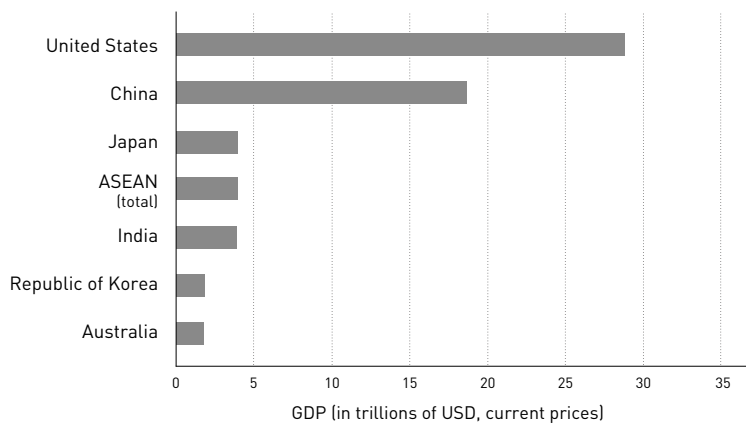
6) Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2025 Edition, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/> (accessed on January 21, 2026).

Figure 1. Power Scores Based on the Asia Power Index



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

Figure 2. Nominal GDP



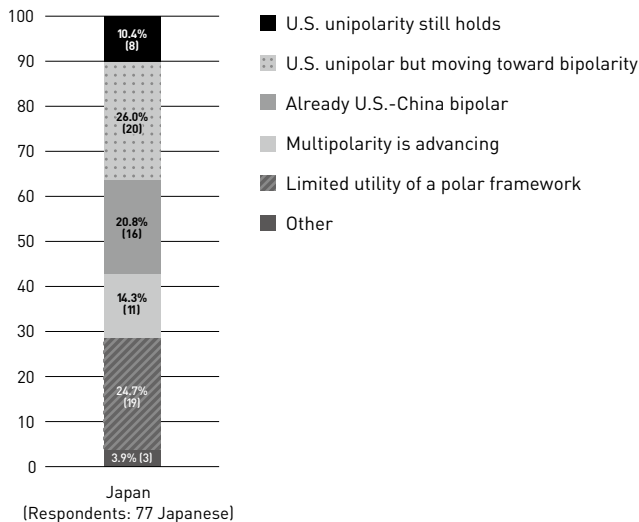
Source: World Bank database, 2024.

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 Igrisū 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

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- 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.

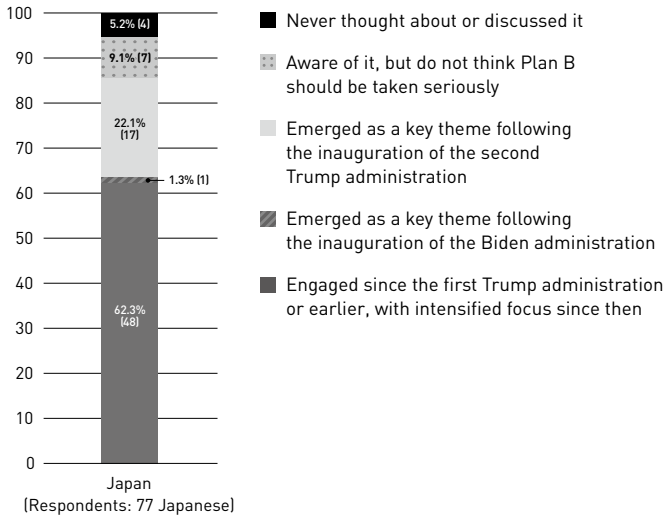
27) Ishihara Yusuke, “The Contested Concept of ‘Network’ in the National Security Strategy 2025: Beyond Burden Sharing in the Indo-Pacific,” *DCER Insight*, Dentsu Soken Center for Economic Security Research, December 19, 2025, <https://dcer.dentsusoken.com/en/reports/yi25001/>.

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.

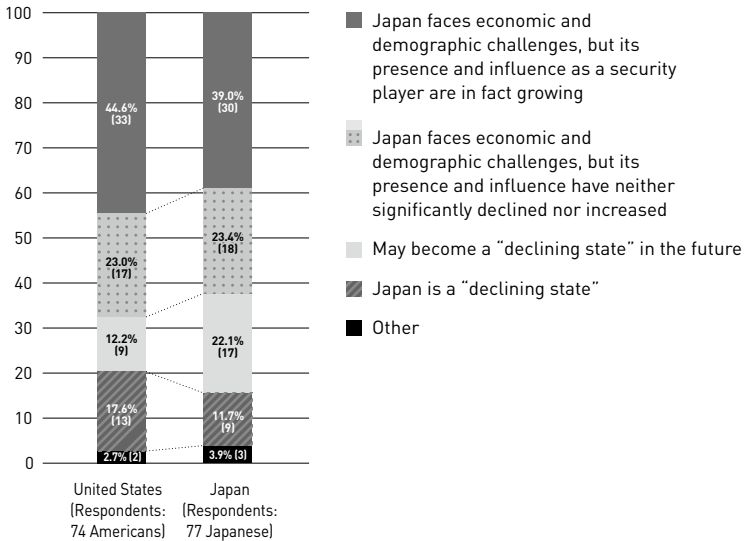
46) See, for example, The Centre for Economics and Business Research, World Economic League Table (2025), <https://cebr.com/world-economic-league-table/> (accessed on January 31, 2025).

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, Kītachosen* [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.

