

NORTHEAST ASIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE GEOPOLITICAL NEXUS IN INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY

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Abstract

This article focuses on the strategic (economic, political and security) linkages that govern interactions between the major and regional powers in the Indo-Pacific region. It argues that the principal drives of Indo-Pacific security are the strategic significance of the region in terms of its geopolitical location, its economic and demographic characteristic which attract the attention and engagement of the primary and secondary actors involved, and the conflict and cooperation scenarios that link Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. The paper also argues that that a key and inevitable component of Indo-Pacific security is the strategic role of the United States, its relations with all key actors of the Indo-Pacific region and its overwhelming military presence and projection capabilities that cannot be ignored by all actors especially rising China and its perceived threats to U.S. regional and global interests. The paper concludes that despite the existing superpower tensions and rivalries, there is a role for deterrence and balance of power strategies to mitigate existing territorial and resource competitions as in the South China Sea, with ASEAN playing a moderating and interlocutory role in the effort to maintain regional order and stability, thus directly and indirectly impacting Indo-Pacific security.

Keywords: International Relations; Geopolitics; Great Power Rivalry; Balance of Power;

Introduction

Geopolitical trends and developments in the Indo-Pacific region engulfing Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia in the second and third decades of the 21st century confirm the necessity for a deeper investigation of geographically-based inter-regional interactions and the continuing impact of great power involvement and engagement in both geo-strategic regions. Given the strategic significance of both these regions to major power interests and influence in the pursuit of national, regional and global security, the need for a conceptual as well as policy-relevant approach to examine these dynamics has become all the more urgent to address rising challenges to peace, stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

This paper will focus on the following issues: (a) The political, economic and security linkages between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia; (b) The role of Great Powers especially the United States and China in impacting the geo-strategic landscape of Indo-Pacific; and (c) the regional response and initiatives by regional actors in Northeast Asia (Japan, South Korea, and North Korea) and the individual/collective response by Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The paper will employ a conceptual/analytical framework grounded in realism to encapsulate the ongoing major power competition and conduct by regional states in the Indo-Pacific region. It will end with some conclusions on the geopolitical nexus that have policy-relevant implications for Indo-Pacific security.

Indo-Pacific Security: Key Components

The Indo-Pacific Region is an expansive terrain encompassing influential geo-political actors that have, and are continuing to shape the strategic scenario of the region via their interests, influence, engagement and involvement in multiple interactions spanning political, ideological, economic, security and cultural spheres. The geographic area of this region is indeed vast linking both the Pacific and Indian oceans, thus privileging the role of linkage politics as well as underscoring the nexus between the security dynamics of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.



Source: Wikipedia. Publicly available (Accessed: 10 March 2025)

In its widest sense, the term geopolitically covers all nations and islands surrounding either the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean, encompassing mainland African and Asian nations who border these oceans, such as India and South Africa, Indian Ocean territories such as the Kerguelen Islands and Seychelles, the Malay Archipelago (which is within the bounds of both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific), Japan, Russia and other Far East nations bordering the Pacific, Australia and all the Pacific Islands east of them, as well as Pacific nations of the Americas such as Canada or Mexico. ASEAN countries (defined as those in Southeast Asia and the Malay Archipelago) are considered to be geographically at the centre of the political Indo-Pacific (Thuong and Oanh, 2021).

The strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region need not be overstated. As the most dynamic and fastest-growing region on earth, the Indo-Pacific is an essential driver of America's future security and prosperity. The region is home to more than half the world's population, and it accounts for 60 percent of global GDP as well as two-thirds of global economic growth. The Indo-Pacific comprises 40 countries and economies: Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, the Pacific Island Countries, Pakistan and The People's Republic of China (PRC). In a more functional perspective, the interconnectedness and the interdependence of the two oceans is a product of growing forces of globalization, trade and changing equations between various actors which has broken down older boundaries and opened up new avenues. Growing mobility across the oceans has helped formulate an integrated approach. Given that it contains the world's most crucial sea routes, the world's most populous nations fuelling high energy demands on its rims, and a stretch encapsulating the finest global commons, the Indo-Pacific is adjudged to be the centre of the globe in terms of politics, economics and strategic intercourse among the principal actors of world politics. Strategically, the Indo-Pacific has been seen as a continuum across the two oceans joined together by

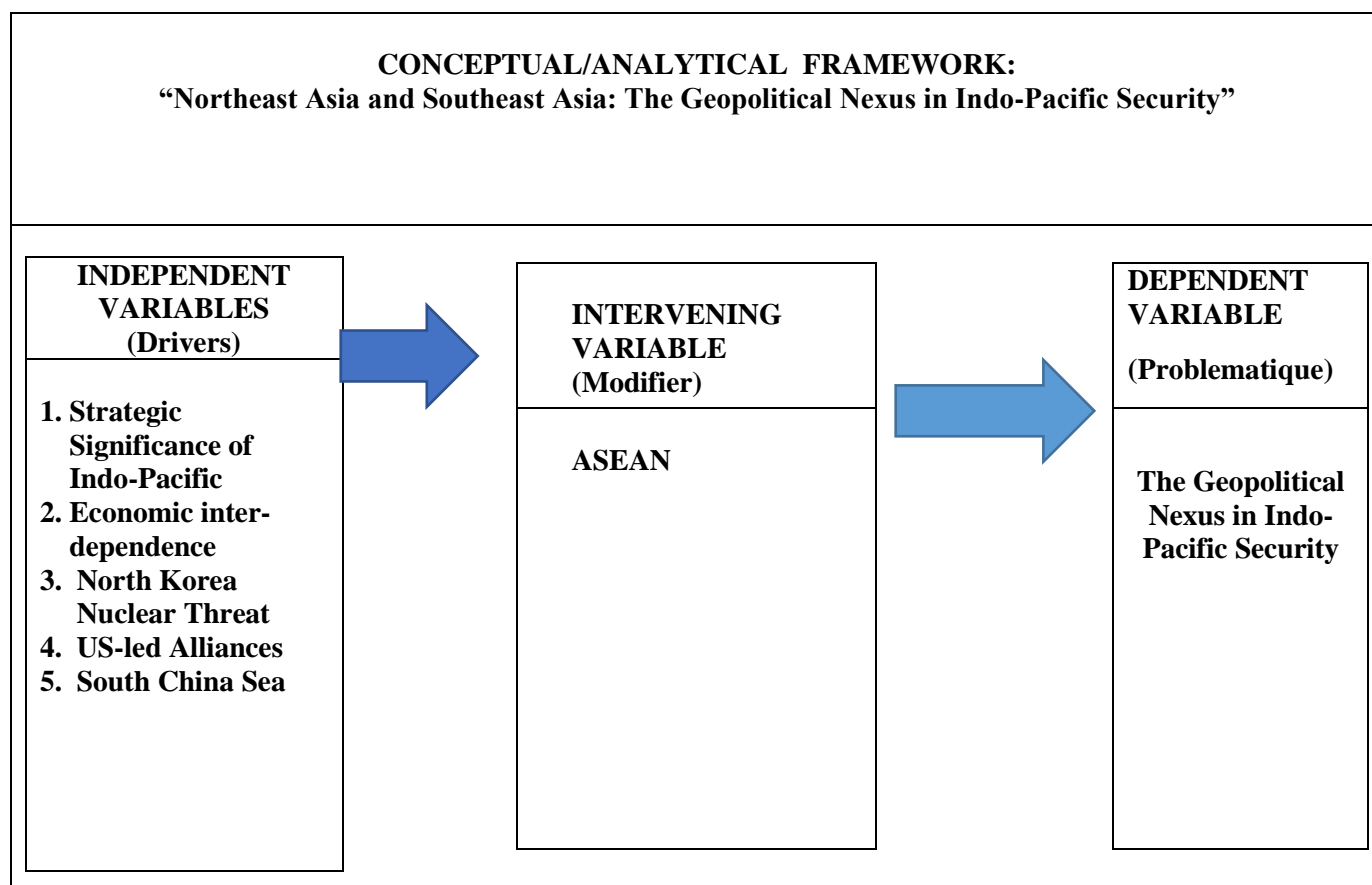
its main trading channel, the Straits of Malacca. The growing military, political, economic and strategic influence of China since the beginning of the 21st century coupled with the relative decline of global Pax Americana are two critical variables informing Indo-Pacific security today.

Indo-Pacific: Economic Interdependence

The Indo-Pacific region lies at the crossroads of trade, shipping routes, transportation hubs, and cultural intercourse. It is also home to 65% of the world population, and accounts for 62% of the world's GDP, 46% of international trade, and half of global maritime transport. The Indo-Pacific region accounts for a large portion of global trade, with a high level of intra-regional commerce between countries like China, India, Japan, and Australia. Despite potential trade tensions and global economic uncertainties epitomised by ongoing U.S.-China trade frictions since the first Trump Administration (2017-2021) and continuing into the second Trump Administration from January 2025, the and global economic uncertainties, the Indo-Pacific region is still experiencing stronger trade growth compared to the global average. China appears to be the main engine of economic transactions with the highest net trade in goods. The region's two major players -- U.S. and China are continuing to exercise a dominant political, economic and strategic influence, which together with the economic and security linkages with ASEAN, are thereby strengthening the nexus between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. India and Japan are also significant players in this power matrix in the Indo-Pacific region.

The geostrategic importance of Indo-Pacific is further underscored by the major trade routes including the Straits of Malacca, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Northern Indian Ocean, the Lombok Strait, and the Suez Canal, with the Straits of Malacca being particularly crucial as a key passageway connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and facilitating a large volume of global trade. The Indo-Pacific region is home to more than half of the world's population. This includes some of the world's most populated countries, such as China and India.

The geopolitical link or nexus between Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific security can be further conceptualised in the analytical framework below, which identifies the main drivers Indo-Pacific security, with ASEAN as an intervening variable in terms of its role as an interlocutor in Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific security dialogues thus injecting a moderating influence on strategic initiatives and responses that impact on regional security.



Northeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Security

Since the end of World War II, the Indo-Pacific landscape has served as a platform for ideological struggle, civil wars, arms race, economic competition, big power interventions underscoring American hegemonic influence, and balance of power strategies at the global and regional levels. Pearl Harbour, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Vietnam all together account for the nexus between Northeast Asian security and Southeast Asian security --- and taken together, Indo-Pacific security. The Northeast Asian security complex, even today, appears to be intractable. A nuclearized North Korea would invariably pose a major security threat to other Indo-Pacific nations especially South Korea and Japan. As observed by a former U.S. ambassador familiar with North Korea’s nuclear development, “One of the greatest existential threats to the United States and its allies and partners is nuclear proliferation from North Korea” (DeTranji 2024: 55). Indeed, the ideological and political division of the Korean Peninsula since the Korean Armistice in 1953 remains a continuing challenge to Indo-Pacific stability and security. The United States, together with its two other Northeast Asian allies, Japan and South Korea have, over the past seven decades managed to maintain a rather tenuous balance of power that has prevented open conflict and war between the two Koreas, and by extension with the United States and possibly involving China as well.

Currently, the phenomenal rise of China has become a major chip on the Indo-Pacific chessboard. It has, rightly or wrongly, triggered Sino-U.S. competition for power and influence, with each great power offering its own version of the constituents of Indo-Pacific security. As a result, lesser powers and smaller nations are being forced to make a choice they would rather avoid. The PRC initiated the campaign as early as 2010 with its One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy.

The Korean Peninsula and the intermittent as well as protracted tensions between Pyongyang and Seoul are a stark reminder of unsettled territorial issues emanating from the Cold War and the absence of

genuine dialogue to resolve the danger poised by North Korea's nuclear weapons development, especially since the beginning of the 21st century. The question of who represents the legitimate government of Korea (North and South) remains unanswered to date although there is general consensus that South Korea is widely recognised as a democracy, and therefore representing the will of the people, while North Korea continues to provide overwhelming evidence that it is a dictatorship, devoid of any semblance of democracy. Instability on the Korean Peninsula has ramifications for the entire Indo-Pacific region. Arguably, Pyongyang's nuclear threat impacts more directly on South Korea and Japan. Instructively, South Korea's *Indo-Pacific Strategy* explicitly recognizes Taiwan as a key partner for cooperation, stating that it "reaffirms the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and for the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific" (Lee, 2024).

China's approach to North Korea is often described as a balancing act, a delicate dance between competing priorities. On one hand, Beijing views Pyongyang as a crucial buffer state, shielding China from the direct influence of the U.S. and its allies in the Korean peninsula. This security concern, deeply rooted in the shared history of resisting Japanese imperialism and the Korean War, forms the bedrock of their relationship. China's role on the Korean Peninsula is strongly guided by its strategic objectives: to underwrite the economy of North Korea to prevent the Pyongyang regime from total collapse, and also to use it as a lever against the United States and its two allies, South Korea and Japan. In doing so it hopes to ensure strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula, maintain its influence in North Korea while at the same time retaining Beijing's ability to control its ally. While the patron-client relationship has at times been rocky, there is little doubt that Pyongyang's survival as a state would be short-lived without Beijing's patronage. As argued by Wang and McGregor (2019), China's financial and trade support effectively facilitated North Korea's nuclear program by keeping its economy afloat and thus eroded the prospects of Korean re-unification.

Beijing's economic support is obviously designed to ensure Pyongyang's dependence on the PRC. Beijing has been Pyongyang's top trading partner for more than two decades, accounting for roughly 98 percent of North Korea's official total imports and exports in 2023 (Fong 2024). It should also be noted that North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world, remains isolated from mainstream political, economic and diplomatic interactions besides also being subjected to international sanctions. In the light of external economic pressure on Pyongyang, Beijing has provided the regime with a safety valve by extending food and energy assistance. North Korea has repeatedly faced severe droughts and flooding, which threaten its food supply. Famine ravaged the country in the 1990s, killing anywhere from a half million people to more than 3 million. As Seth categorically states, "North Korea's famine was a singular event. Unlike most major modern famines, it was not the product of political upheaval and less the result of natural disaster than of long-term, failed economic policies" (Seth, 2011: 28). Today, UN agencies estimate that more than 40 percent of the population--almost eleven million people—are undernourished (*Korea Herald*, 2022).

China's perception of the U.S. as a strategic competitor in the Indo-Pacific significantly shapes its approach to North Korea. The strengthening of U.S. alliances in the region, coupled with increased military presence, fuels anxieties in Beijing. This dynamic incentivizes China to maintain North Korea as a buffer state, wary of any outcome that might bolster U.S. influence on its border. Geopolitical considerations undoubtedly crept into Beijing's view of North Korea in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War (Chen 2023).

China and North Korea's 1961 mutual defence treaty commits the signatories to provide the other with military aid if they are attacked. This alliance is Beijing's sole formal security commitment, and China has made clear in the past that it would protect North Korea if the United States and South Korea attacked first. However, Beijing has implied that its treaty obligations would not apply if Pyongyang initiates conflict and that Beijing would instead stay neutral. The defence agreement has never been invoked. Beijing's stand on North Korea shows appreciation of the strategic linkages informing Indo-Pacific security. Nevertheless, misperceptions and miscalculations by both Pyongyang and Beijing in

the event of incidents allegedly triggered by Seoul could well compel China to come to the aid of North Korea, thus leading to a wider conflict involving the United States. This underscores the critical link or nexus between the Korean Peninsula and the security of the Indo-Pacific region.

U.S.-led Alliances and Military Power Projection in the Indo-Pacific Region

Among the major powers especially the U.S., China and India, the country with significant power projection capabilities is undoubtedly the United States. The United States hosts military bases in Hawaii, Alaska, Guam, Micronesia, Diego Garcia, and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States has military bases in Hawaii, Alaska, Guam, Micronesia, Diego Garcia, and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. No other superpower can currently match the extensive geographical military presence of the U.S. in Indo Pacific. There are at least eight US bases in the Pacific, namely (1) Andersen Air Force Base located in Guam since 1944, (2) Hickam Air Force Base: Part of the 15th Wing (3) Eielson Air Force Base: Part of the PACAF units, (4) Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson: Part of the PACAF units, (5) Kadena Air Base: Part of the PACAF units, (6) Kunsan Air Base: Part of the PACAF units, (7) Misawa Air Base: Part of the PACAF units, and (8) Osan Air Base: Part of the PACAF units. US bases in other countries of Indo Pacific include Camp Humphreys: Located in South Korea, this is the largest US overseas base by area, Darwin, Australia (has U.S. personnel), Philippines (has US military installations, and Singapore (has US military installations). The US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) headquarters is located at Camp H.M. Smith in Hawaii. Notably, in the Indo-Pacific region INDOPACOM has 375,000 military personnel, of which 46,000 are USAF, and 2,500 aircraft operating from US Pacific bases in Hawaii (Source: About INDOPACOM: <https://www.pacom.mil/about-usindopacom/>--Accessed: 15/2/2025). This apparently awesome display of military power and projection remains uncontested by its nearest rival China which also benefits from the security and stability arising from America's global and regional military presence. Undeniably, the expansive U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific geopolitically links Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.

The geostrategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region to U.S. political, economic and security interests was already underscored as early as the mid-19th century by Commodore Perry's visit to Japan in 1853, a date which also marked the entry of the United States into the imperial race and competition for colonies, concessions and ports begun earlier by the continental European powers in Africa and Asia. Almost five decades later, in 1899, U.S. commercial interests provided the impetus for the announcement of the official policy labelled the "Open Door" doctrine declaring that Washington has a right to equal commercial opportunity to secure economic access already granted by a weak Chinese Government to the European colonial powers. In other words, the U.S. too wanted to participate in the slicing of the Chinese melon like other imperial powers. Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War led to the United States acquiring territories like Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines – late 19th century developments that clearly marked the rise of America as a global power, and more significantly, as an Indo-Pacific power. The Pacific War (1942-1945) which ended with the defeat of Japan, paved the way for a string of security alliances in Asia Pacific/Indo Pacific spanning over 70 years to the present.

This brief background on the growth of U.S. engagement is essential to the understanding of current security concerns of Washington in evaluating the threat posed by a rising China to a resident power that has enjoyed unrivalled pre-eminence since the beginning of the 20th century. While American military supremacy in the Indo-Pacific region still remains relatively unchallenged, U.S. economic supremacy has clearly been eroded by the phenomenal economic rise of China in the past four decades. The phenomena of regionalism and regionalisation both in Europe and Asia starting with the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957, the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) ten years later, followed by APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum) in 1989, the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005, and the establishment of the CPTPP (Comprehensive Program for Trans-Pacific Partnership) in 2018, from which Trump 1.0 withdrew U.S.

membership in January 2017 – are all indications of the growing trend of economic multipolarity in the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region. The CPTPP is a free trade agreement that currently comprises 11 countries in the Asia-Pacific region: Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam, representing one of the largest global free trade areas, with member states accounting for about 13.5 to 14.5 per cent of global GDP. Despite the withdrawal of the United States, the CPTPP remains one of the largest global free trade areas, with member states accounting for about 13.5 to 14.5 per cent of global GDP.

The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific Security

The South China Sea (SCS) straddles an area of over 3.6 million square kilometres comprising hundreds of odd atolls, islets, reefs, coral outcrops and islands. Most of them are not of any significant size, while some remain submerged for much of the time. The external dynamics in SCS arise from the fact that the area is home to strategic waterways that provide critical supply lines to the major maritime powers such as USA, Japan, India (besides China), and Australia -- who see themselves as legitimate stakeholders/users of SCS -- that have a role to maintain peace and security in the region. Rising Asian oil demand, as well as Japan's oil needs, will need to be imported from the Middle East and Africa, and this essentially requires unimpeded passage through the strategic Strait of Malacca into the South China Sea. Countries in the Asia-Pacific region/Indo-Pacific region depend on seaborne trade to fuel their economic growth, and this has led to SCS' transformation into one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

In economic terms, nearly USD 4 trillion worth of global trade passes through the South China Sea annually, accounting for a third of the global maritime trade. More significantly, 80 percent of China's energy imports and about 40 percent of China's total trade passes through the South China Sea. Over half of the world's merchant fleet (by tonnage) sails through the SCS every year. The economic potential and geopolitical importance of the SCS region has triggered rivalry and competition for the resources of SCS. More recently, SCS has witnessed the construction of airstrips, buildings of sorts, including a motel on one of the islets. These islets are claimed, in whole or in part, by six parties of the Indo-Pacific:- Brunei, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam. Some of these claims overlap, but China lays claim to the entire South China Sea—hence the security dimension emerges from these contending claims. In his book, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, Bill Hayton, a geopolitics expert on Southeast Asia, observes that the South China Sea is a crucial link in the 'global commons', connecting the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and Europe. He adds that along with the East China Sea, it is the most contested piece of sea in the world and one of the main reasons for the current anxiety over China's intentions by regional claimants as well as the major powers" (Hayton, 2024).

The U.S. Factor in the South China Sea Disputes

U.S. policy towards the South China Sea disputes prior to the formulation of Obama's Pivot to Asia strategy in 2012, has *always* emphasized its deep commitment to the peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute, freedom of navigation, unimpeded legal commerce, regional peace and stability, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and maritime security (De Castro 2018, 193). Since the re-balancing policy announced by the Obama Administration following the decision to withdraw from two theatres of conflict—Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington has paid more attention to strategic developments in Southeast Asia. The rapid rise of China as a major power/superpower, with implications for China's growing influence in Southeast Asia, and America's declining influence in the region, has troubled Washington which is increasingly convinced that the regional balance of power was apparently tilting in favour of China.

Economically, the U.S. appeared unable to compete with China's Maritime Silk Road and One Belt One Road (OBOR), later renamed BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), as cash-strapped nations in ASEAN

began to turn increasingly to China for financial aid to fund infrastructure projects -- eg. Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and even Malaysia. The U.S. supports application of international law in SCS, but itself has not signed UNCLOS. This has weakened America's legal position on SCS. The U.S. and its allies (UK, Germany, France, Netherlands, Australia, and even Canada) are sending warships to the South China Sea. China objects to these military exercises authorized by President Obama, and also under Trump. The rising military power of China has encouraged Beijing to directly if not indirectly challenge the waning Pax Americana in Asia. The U.S. decision to establish and develop a military base in Darwin since 2011 (under Obama's Pivot to Asia Policy) appeared to be a strategic move:- (a) to balance the rise of Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific; (b) to pre-empt further Chinese military moves that can alter the territorial status quo in the South China Sea; and (c) to assure Asian allies especially Japan, South Korea and ASEAN that the U.S. will still remain a pre-eminent power in the region. The U.S. is still the lone superpower, and it still wields strong influence on every continent. However, the gap between U.S. power and other rival nations (eg. Russia, China, India) is shrinking.

Former President Joe Biden has categorically said that the U.S. rejects China's excessive claims in the SCS, and supports a rule-based order, which includes freedom of navigation in the open seas. The U.S. continues to deploy warships that traverse the SCS – such as USS Ohio and USS John McCain. Both have superior capability for anti-submarine warfare compared to China's deployments in SCS. These deployments suggest continuity of U.S. approach to SCS disputes from Trump to Biden, supporting U.S. Treaty allies, Japan, Australia and Philippines, plus shoring up the legal position of the ASEAN claimants. Early February 2021, the destroyer John S McCain passed through the Taiwan Strait and conducted freedom of navigation operations in the disputed Paracel islands. More recently, in October 2024, the USS Halsey (a destroyer), sailed near the Paracel Islands, leading to an encounter with the Chinese navy, with Washington insisting on freedom of navigation in international waters such as the SCS.

In July 2024, the QUAD foreign ministers (USA, Japan, India, Australia) met in Tokyo and reiterated their commitment to Freedom of Navigation in the Open Seas, stating that this is multilateralism at work to ensure stability and security in the South China Sea (Reuters, July 2024). From Obama (2008-2016) through Trump (2017-2021), Biden (2021-2024) and also Trump 2.0 (January 2025 to present), there has been a clear shift in Washington's approach to the South China Sea – from neutrality to active engagement and alignment with regional and external powers who are evidently converging on the need to restrain China's assertive conduct in the South China Sea.

Interests of other Major and Middle Powers and the Link to Indo-Pacific Security

Japan

Japan is a global maritime power depending for its prosperity on freedom of navigation in the open seas. Tokyo therefore considers the South China Sea as an international waterway, and supports freedom of movement in SCS. It opposes any effort to nationalise the SCS. The SCS which stretches approximately 1,750 miles from the Bashi Channel/Luzon Strait to Singapore, and 1,250 miles from Hongkong to Brunei, is approximately 9.5 times as large as Japan, and includes around 200 islands, rocks, shoals and reefs. There are also several prominent archipelagos such as the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands – and each has its own strategic significance. That is why China seized the Paracels from Vietnam in 1974, Mischief Reef from the Philippines in 1995, and Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012. Since then Tokyo has expressed serious concern over Beijing's land reclamation, militarization, and island-building activities in SCS.

Japan (like the U.S.) fears the Chinese-held outposts, some of which boast military-grade airfields and advanced weaponry, could be used to restrict free movement in an area that includes vital sea lanes. Japan is concerned that, being an ally of the U.S. (U.S.-Japan Alliance), in the event of a military confrontation between the U.S. and China over SCS, Tokyo will invariably be dragged into the conflict.

The U.S. and Japan, as well as India and Australia, as global maritime powers heavily dependent on maritime trade to promote their economic welfare, would oppose any attempt to close any portion of the open seas that will block the free flow of commerce, or restrict strategic access. Tokyo believes that a balance of power approach to the SCS is the best guarantee to protect Japan's maritime interests in the SCS.

While calling on all parties to exercise restraint, Tokyo was unequivocal about strengthening deterrence against further Chinese encroachments in SCS. Over the past decade, Tokyo, like Washington, has evidenced a deeper interest, concern and commitment to freedom of navigation and the need to uphold a rules-based order consistent with UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) in the South China Sea.

India

India is a maritime power in Southeast Asia by virtue of its ownership of the Andaman and Nicobar islands which are located only 90 miles off the coast of Sumatra, it is also a rising Indo-Pacific power. India views the South China Sea as a strategic passageway containing critical sea lanes through which oil and other commercial goods flow from the Middle East and Southeast Asia to Japan, Korea and China. New Delhi's interest and engagement in SCS must be viewed in the light of India's rise in the Post-Cold War era, its expanding engagement with ASEAN, and its desire for stronger political, economic and strategic engagement in Southeast Asia, first via its Look East Policy LEP, 1990-2014), and since 2014 via its Act East Policy (AEP). As India's political, economic, diplomatic and military engagement with ASEAN increases, New Delhi's concern for regional stability and security in Southeast Asia will correspondingly grow, and will include more involvement in the South China Sea disputes.

Thus, strategic motivations have driven India to participate more actively in the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). Intermittent clashes on the Sino-Indian border have encouraged New Delhi to support the Quad deterrence strategy vis-à-vis China in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, although India will be cautious not to strain bilateral ties with China over the yet unresolved border disputes since the outbreak of the Sino-Indian border war in 1962. There is evidently a balance of power aspect to the formation of QUAD and its more recent re-activation (since 2017): As China flexes its muscles in the SCS, it will drive other external powers and regional states to deter China's hegemony in Asia. Hence, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia may be silently or supporting the QUAD to protect their own interests in the South China Sea.

The India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership (2004), plus India's role in ARF, ASEM, EAS, ADMM, ADMM PLUS, and Expanded Maritime Forum – are all indications of India's interest in balancing the power of China in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Malabar Exercise involving Indian and U.S. navies, since 1992 became trilateral when Japan joined in 2015. India also exercises with ASEAN navies under MILAN (Multilateral Naval Exercises) since the 1990s aimed at strengthening Indian naval presence in Southeast Asia. In 2020 alone India has carried out coordinated naval patrols with Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia – all adding to a rising consciousness of India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region, while also underscoring the inseparable links between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.

Australia, ASEAN and the Security of the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific

Australia is a natural maritime power, given its continental size island-state configuration. Australia is a strong ally of the United States, and its defence and security relations are also governed by the U.S.-Australian Alliance. Australia views the South Pacific as its backyard, and is loathe to accepting the political, economic and strategic presence of other major powers such as China whose influence is expanding in the Pacific islands. In this regard, Canberra's strategic perspective appears to be not dissimilar to President Putin's assertion in Eastern Europe that a hostile regime in Kyiv which joins

NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and parks nuclear-tipped missiles on Ukraine's 1,200 mile land border with Russia poses a direct threat to Russia's national security. Great powers like the United States and Russia that the existence of hostile regimes on their borders poses a direct threat to their national security. In this regard, the concept Indo-Pacific security formulated by Washington would not be very different from the concept of Eurasian security emanating from Moscow. In both cases, national interest priorities are pre-eminent, and in the case of the U.S. vis-à-vis Indo-Pacific security, there is an evident convergence of strategic perspectives by U.S. allies (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and some ASEAN countries especially Singapore and The Philippines) on the modalities of maintaining regional stability and security, going forward. Singapore, like Australia, survives and prospers through maritime trade and freedom of commerce in the open seas. Any attempt to shutoff maritime access in any international strait or waterway can seriously affect the economy of the island republic. Singapore therefore supports the 2016 PCA ruling in the Philippine-China arbitral dispute over sovereignty in the SCS.

Singapore fears that island-building activities in SCS since 2009 could convert this potential flashpoint into open war at some point, and is keen to support diplomacy to avoid the "Thucydides Trap" (precipitating conflict and war due to failure to resolve the contest for supremacy between a resident power (U.S.) and a rising power (China)). More than any other ASEAN member, Singapore strongly supports multi-level engagement by external powers to ensure a stable balance of power in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region as the best guarantee of national sovereignty and regional autonomy. The city-state, as a non-aligned member, does face a dilemma in firmly supporting a U.S. military presence in the region as a deterrent to the creation of a Beijing-led hegemony in Southeast Asia and the need to also maintain good economic and diplomatic relations with this rising Asian power as revealed by the trade dimension.

Indonesia is not a direct claimant state in the South China Sea sovereignty disputes, but has become increasingly concerned with the presence of Chinese fishing boats in the Natuna Islands, which are part of Indonesia's EEZ. The Natuna Sea is located at the southernmost end of the South China Sea. Nevertheless, if China continues to flex its muscles in the Natuna Islands and pose a direct threat to Indonesia's national interests, Jakarta may be obliged to align itself more with the QUAD to strengthen its ability to resist China's intrusions into Indonesia's sovereignty.

Malaysia, Vietnam and The Philippines have overlapping claims in the South China and their exclusive economic zones (EEZ). These intra-ASEAN contestations notwithstanding, Malaysia said it rejects China's claims to historic rights, or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction, with respect to the maritime areas of the SCS encompassed by the relevant part of the 'nine-dash line'. The Government of Malaysia considers that the PRC's claim to the maritime features in the South China Sea is contrary to the provisions of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea). Hence, then Foreign Minister of Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, 2018–2020)) Saifuddin Abdullah dismissed China's South China Sea claims based on its nine-dash line as ridiculous, i.e. having no basis in international law (Ngeow, 2021).

Nevertheless, factors governing the political economy of Malaysia-China relations have, and do intervene to moderate Malaysia's view of Beijing's strident approach in the SCS. China is Malaysia's largest trading partner with heavy concentration on exports to China of two primary products, electronics and palm oil. Bilateral trade has been increasing by 15 per cent over the past decade from USD63.6 billion in 2017 to USD77.7 billion in 2018. Perceptions of over-dependence on China have been generated by mercantilist supporters who may be inclined to argue that this heavy reliance on China for economic livelihood weakens the country's ability to stand up to Beijing's challenges to Malaysia's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. Notably, China's share of Malaysia's total trade is around 17 % while the greater portion of Malaysia's external trade comes from intra-regional sources i.e. with ASEAN which accounts for nearly 30 percent. Given this scenario of economic dependence on China, Malaysia will take a more cautious approach to external initiatives for the maintenance of Indo-Pacific security, prioritising instead its immediate national interests undergirded by a long-established foreign policy of equidistance and non-alignment.

The Role of Diplomacy and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific

The history of international relations is replete with records of negotiations, treaties and the use of military power in pursuit of national interests. Morgenthau's treatise on *Politics Among nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* is the modern day encapsulation of the intertwining role of power, force and diplomacy in defending national interests and maintaining regional and international stability and security. He argues that states are both offensively and defensively oriented, and they will form a coalition to balance against aggressors. This strategy of offensive and defensive deterrence tends to lead inexorably "to a world of constant security competition, with the possibility of war always in the background" (Morgenthau 2006, 573).

Morgenthau underscores the correlation between U.S. hegemony, power and regional stability in the U.S.-crafted security architecture that emerged in post-World War II Asia. The Asia-Pacific (now termed Indo-Pacific) balance of power has undoubtedly been maintained by the central pillar of Asia-Pacific stability over the past seven decades: the U.S.-Japan Alliance (1951) complemented by U.S.-linked bilateral security alliances especially the U.S.-Republic of Korea Mutual Defense Treaty (1953), and U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (1951). However, since the U.S. military withdrawal from Vietnam under the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, Washington's regional security approach was based on diversifying its hitherto dominant military presence by requesting friends and allies to shoulder greater responsibilities through the "burden sharing and partnership" strategy. America will continue to provide high-tech strategic support to strengthen the defence capabilities of its friends and allies in Asia. The U.S. military reverses in Iraq and of late, Afghanistan have apparently sent a strong signal to America's security partners that, in the wake of China's rise and military assertions in the South China Sea, the regional balance of power will irretrievably shift in favour of Beijing absent a U.S.-led collective counterforce to restrain the rising dragon in SCS.

The recent expansion of collective security thinking by other Asian and western powers explains the growing rationale for a consolidated platform under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) whose primary objective is deterrence of China's territorial ambitions in SCS. The QUAD, which lay dormant for ten years since its inception in 2007, has now found a new energy and purpose since 2017 in apparent response to what the QUAD powers believe to be Beijing's incessant desire to nationalize and militarize the South China Sea. External powers especially the United States, Japan, India and Australia have recently expressed deeper concern over Beijing's robust island building activities and triangulation of reclaimed land reinforced by the construction of military bases and the stationing of military personnel in SCS.

Of late, the United Kingdom and also other EU states (France and Germany) are showing greater interest in developments in the South China Sea. The EU shares the concern of ASEAN and the QUAD powers in restraining any regional hegemon from undertaking actions that have the effect of closing off the SCS to international shipping, commerce and freedom of movement in the Indo-Pacific region. The UK is also conscious of the asymmetry of power between China, a superpower, and the other smaller claimants including Malaysia and Brunei.

All the above-mentioned powers appear to be convinced that dialogue alone will not furnish the necessary restraint to limit China's territorial ambitions in this strategic area of water. For diplomacy to work, it must invariably be accompanied by deterrent mechanisms informed by military power. The QUAD powers have increased ship visits to the South China Sea, while Britain has also weighed in with its deployment of naval assets to SCS. A new coalition of forces has also just emerged to send a strong signal to Beijing that restraint and the exercise of prudence in the South China Sea would be the more desirable approach to defuse tension and avert conflict or war. The new trilateral alliance comprising Australia, UK and U.S. or AUKUS was formed on 15th September 2021, thereby indicating that the strategic scenario in SCS is evolving in a more ominous direction. Under the agreement, the United States and United Kingdom will help Australia to develop and deploy nuclear-powered submarines to shore up the Western military presence in the Pacific region and cooperate in

strengthening Canberra's undersea technologies. However, with the formation of AUKUS, the concept of regional security in the Indo-Pacific is taking deeper root as the Western powers upgrade their perceptions of strategic threat from China as a regional and global hegemon. Indeed, the AUKUS powers are convinced that a sufficient level of deterrence is necessary to ensure that the sovereignty claims of all parties in the SCS dispute are duly respected under international law.

The annual Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore (31 May – 2 June 2024) reflected the widening gap in strategic perceptions of the United States and China on how best to resolve the two major flashpoints in Asia Pacific: Taiwan and the South China Sea (Russell and Chanlett-Avery, 2024). The issues discussed also focused on geopolitical interests and concerns beyond the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region, such as the Russia-Ukraine war which has encouraged closer strategic cooperation between the AUKUS powers, the EU (especially Germany and France) and Japan. The U.S. and its allies are inclined to see a linkage between current developments in Ukraine, Taiwan, and the South China Sea and their implications for democracy, a rules-based order, and international law. Both sides emphasized the need for diplomacy while also strengthening their levels of suspicion and deterrence against each other

Conclusion: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Security

The foregoing discussion has highlighted the various factors at play in explaining the economic, political and security nexus between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Collectively, these elements constitute the broader environment of Indo-Pacific security. In the 'New Asia' of the 21st century, the balance of power is evidently at work again. Many of China's neighbours are feeling uneasy over the rapid rise of China, and have sought closer ties with Washington to counterbalance the influence of China. Nations such as South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Indonesia see the United States as a benevolent power that has no imperial ambitions in Asia, and as a country that presents considerable economic opportunity through trade. In contrast, they are suspicious of China's ambitions in the region. Given the dynamics of the balance of power, ASEAN and other actors, especially the major powers in the Indo-Pacific Region), will continue to check China's military ambitions, while enhancing their own national capabilities. The advocacy of a rules-based order in SCS by all external powers augmented by UNCLOS is to avert nationalization of the global commons. Admittedly, China considers the South China Sea as its core interest which must be defended at all costs. But it is equally pertinent to note that the principal claimant states of ASEAN—especially Vietnam, Philippines and Malaysia also view the South China Sea as their core interest. In the same vein, even the external maritime powers such as India, Japan, Australia, and the European Union besides the United States, can legitimately claim it is in their core interests to ensure a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). These considerations do not, however, underplay the role of dialogue and inter-regional cooperation exemplified by the "ASEAN Way" of building consensus and engaging in economic and security cooperation with all major stakeholders in Indo-Pacific security (Ramiz 2020). ASEAN's role as an interlocutor in Asia-Pacific security matters also points to its strengths as a tension reducing organization.

ASEAN is also realistic in employing balance of power and deterrence strategies to maintain the peace. In the absence of a Code of Conduct, ASEAN claimants will be inclined to work openly or discreetly with external powers such as the Quad to strengthen deterrence against China, and to protect their territorial claims in the SCS. Indeed, U.S. alliance engagement has been exceptionally strong in recent years, and will continue to be maintained even under a U.S. president who thinks in transactional terms, such as Trump 2.0. For the U.S., rightly or wrongly, China and North Korea are viewed as existential threats to American interests in the Indo-Pacific region. As Grossman (2014) correctly observes, "The only thing that could shift this dynamic is a decline in regional threat perceptions, but that seems to be a very remote possibility". Recent developments in the Russia-Ukraine war indicate a shift in President Trump's strategic perspective of Russia. President Trump has put American national interests first, and apparently does not see the need to underwrite European security via the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), thus shifting the burden to Europeans themselves (Bergmann 2025). However, in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. policy together with support from allies and friends can be expected to be

stable, thus affirming the strategic continuity in U.S. commitment to Indo-Pacific, underscoring the security nexus integrating Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. In sum, only a dynamic and sustainable balance of power undergirded by diplomacy and deterrence via an endogenous-exogenous partnership in the Indo-Pacific region can provide stronger assurance to regional and external actors of continued regional peace, security, development and stability in the foreseeable future.

Acknowledgement

This study was partially supported by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, Kuala Lumpur.

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