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Convergence of the Indo-Pacific with the Indian Ocean—Is a Maritime-Centric Approach Enough?

An Indian Perspective

AIR MARSHAL (DR) DIPTENDU CHOUDHURY, INDIAN AIR FORCE, RETIRED

Abstract

This article examines China's strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region through the lens of its “Zhōngguó” or “Middle Kingdom” dream of regaining its perceived historical dominance. It traces the deep roots of this aspiration in Chinese nationalism and the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of reclaiming lost territories. The article analyzes China's coercive actions to expand its influence in the East and South China Seas, the Indian Ocean region, and along its land borders with India. It highlights China's growing military capabilities, particularly its increasing use of land-based airpower to complement its maritime forces. The article argues that countering China's aggressive strategies requires a collective, multi-domain approach integrating the strengths of regional powers like India, the United States, and others who believe in a rules-based international order. It calls for cooperation across land, maritime, air, space, and cyber domains to ensure a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Amid the seemingly endless Russo-Ukraine conflict in Europe, the uncertain outcomes of the Gaza dispute, and the instability plaguing Red Sea commerce, the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean dynamics emerge as enduring constants in our geopolitically turbulent world. China's ascent, veiled within Hu Jintao's 和平崛起 (Héping juéqǐ) or “peaceful rise” strategy, initially quelled international apprehensions about its growing power. However, a contradictory reality surfaced with Zheng's quasi-official declaration in 2005, signaling China's ambition to transcend traditional great-power norms and establish a new geopolitical and economic order.¹ While nations striving to enhance their global standing is nothing novel, China's disruptive approach, aimed at asserting its “justified” civilizational dominance as the 中國 (Zhōngguó), or

¹ Zheng Bijian, “China's ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great-Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September–October 2005): 18–24, <https://doi.org/>.

Middle Kingdom, has not only sparked global anxieties but also underpins Beijing's strategies in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

The Name Game

The name resonating with China's imperial legacy is more than a reflection of its geographical and cultural heritage, its ancient connotations fundamentally pointed to political life as the overall frame of reference.² The formal adoption of the name Zhōngguó followed the revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty in 1912, ushering in the era of 中华民国 (*Zhōnghuá Mínguó*), or Republic of China. More than three decades later, the triumph of Communist forces and aspirations for national rejuvenation led to the present designation 中华人民共和国 (*Zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó*), or People's Republic of China (PRC). Ancient Chinese history embraced contemporary republican models to firmly establish the notion of "one Zhōngguó" (One China) as the paramount principle of national unity. The much-debated Middle Kingdom mind-set serves as the foundational concept linking modern China to its perception of an illustrious ancient civilization.

The historical interaction between the West and China witnessed significant shifts marked by two key events. Firstly, following the Treaty of Versailles, China sought full sovereignty over its territories. However, despite its wartime contributions, the European powers conceded Shandong province to Japan, inciting widespread protests and sowing the seeds of communism.³ Secondly, after World War II, a diplomatic failure occurred when former US Chief of Staff of the US Army General George C. Marshall's mediation efforts between the Communist and Nationalist governments faltered, ultimately leading to civil war conditions.⁴ This failure ignited the Communist conflagration that engulfed China.⁵

Since the establishment of the PRC, a cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narrative has been the Century of Humiliation, spanning from the First Opium War in 1839 to the CCP's victory in 1949 in the Chinese Civil War, culminating in the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalists. This historical narrative has been meticulously ingrained through a comprehensive "patriotic education process" by the CCP, serving as a source of inspiration and rallying cry for its citizens to reclaim China's former glory and rightful position in the

² Luke S. K. Kwong, "What's in a Name: Zhongguo (or 'Middle Kingdom') Reconsidered," *Historical Journal* 58, no. 3 (September 2015), 787, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

³ K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: Gregory Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1953), 275–91.

⁴ Raymond J. De Jaegher and Irene Corbally Kuhn, *The Enemy Within: An Eyewitness Account of the Communist Conquest of China* (Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1969), 145–47.

⁵ De Jaegher and Kuhn, *The Enemy Within*, 286–301.

world. This “carefully curated curriculum begins in elementary school and is omnipresent in not only party education but also in the CCP-controlled media. It is designed to instill a love of country and a sense of nationalistic pride.”⁶

More than a decade ago, upon assuming power in 2013, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese people.” He articulated that “the CCP advocates for a return to China’s glorious past, moving the Chinese people from humiliation to a resurgence. The CCP was forging the path for China to reclaim its former glory and return China to its rightful place in the world—a position of leadership.”⁷

The redefinition and reclamation of what is deemed historical Chinese territory have emerged as crucial elements of the China dream. According to Victoria Tin-bor Hui

in 1973, Mao famously lamented to Henry Kissinger the loss of “a half million square kilometers” of territory in Eastern Turkestan, Outer Mongolia, and Manchuria to the Soviet Union. But as we have seen, these peripheral regions were incorporated into China only in the 18th century. “The amazing fact of the 20th century,” noted William C. Kirby, “is that this space [the periphery] was not only redefined as ‘Chinese’ and as the sacred soil of China, but also defended diplomatically to such a degree that the borders of the People’s Republic of China today are essentially those of the Qing.”⁸

Claims also extend to maritime territories, including the contentious nine-dash line in the South China Sea (SCS) and borders with India.⁹ Thus, at the heart of China’s aspirations for regaining former glory lies the reclamation of perceived territorial and maritime spaces, serving as the guiding principle of its long-term national strategy, one it will undoubtedly pursue in the foreseeable future.

Zhōngguó is not merely a name but a symbol of a meticulously nurtured dream, deeply ingrained into the national psyche, underpinning all facets of its comprehensive national power and serving as the essence of its approach to the Indo-Pacific region. Ironically, in 1602, when Matteo Ricci presented his world

⁶ Mark Metcalf, “The National Humiliation Narrative: Dealing with the Present by Fixating on the Past,” *Education about Asia* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 43–50, <https://www.asianstudies.org/>.

⁷ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “The China Dream: Revival of What Historical Greatness?,” in *China Dreams: China’s New Leadership and Future Impacts*, ed. Chih-Shian Liou and Arthur S. Ding (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 3–32, <https://www.worldscientific.com/>.

⁸ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “How China Was Ruled,” *American Interest* 3, no. 4 (March–April 2008), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/>.

⁹ Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia, “The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications,” *American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2013): 98–124. <https://doi.org/>.

map to the Chinese emperor, placing China at the center of the vast Pacific Ocean, little did he foresee the significance this region would hold more than four hundred years later.¹⁰

The Sino-India Game

The territorial dispute between India and China, Asia's two largest nations and neighbors, has been a persistent source of tension for over seven decades. Dubbed as the "world's largest boundary dispute, involving over 120,000 square miles of territory," it ignited into a full-scale war between the two nations in 1962 and continues to fuel sporadic conflicts.¹¹ At the crux of the issue lies China's fixation on Tibet, stemming from its historical claims based on the alleged submission of the region during the ancient Yuan Empire and Qing dynasty.¹² This obsession culminated in China's invasion of Tibet in 1950. Beijing's obstinacy regarding the validity of the McMahon Line and its rejection of the outcomes of the Shimla Conference further exacerbate tensions.¹³ Driving China's actions is a geostrategic imperative to establish connectivity between Yunnan, Xinjiang, and Sichuan provinces with Lhasa in Tibet.¹⁴

The Chinese-occupied Aksai Chin region of India holds crucial geographic significance, serving as a vital link between Tibet and the resource-rich Xinjiang province, which shares borders with multiple countries. This region acts as China's gateway to the politically, security, and economically strategic Central Asian Region, pivotal for initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹⁵

Beijing's strategic engagement with South Asian nations follows country-specific approaches but shares a common agenda of expanding strategic influence to counterbalance India. Its deepening strategic partnership with Pakistan, in particular,

¹⁰ Kwong, "What's in a Name," 804.

¹¹ Shiv Shankar Menon, *Choices – Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2016), 15.

¹² Michael van Walt van Praag and Miek Boltjes, *Tibet Brief 20/20* (Parker, CO: Outskirts Press, 2020), 7.

¹³ Lezlee Brown Halper and Stefan Halper, *Tibet: An Unfinished Story* (Delhi: Hachette India, 2016), 154.

¹⁴ J. J. Singh, *McMahon Line: A Century of Discord* (Haryana: HarperCollins India, 2019), xi. The McMahon Line is a demarcation line that serves as the effective boundary between China and India. It was proposed by Sir Henry McMahon, a British colonial administrator, during the 1914 Simla Convention negotiations between British India, Tibet, and China. The line was intended to delineate the frontier between British India and Tibet, and it generally follows the crest of the Himalayas. However, China never officially accepted the McMahon Line, leading to ongoing disputes and tensions between India and China over the border in the eastern Himalayan region. The McMahon Line remains a significant point of contention in the Sino-Indian border dispute.

¹⁵ Diptendu Choudhury, "Salience of Airpower in Asian Waters," *Naval War College Journal* 32 (2020): 17–29.

has diminished Pakistan's reliance on past extensive US engagement. Nepal's strategic significance lies in its geographical proximity to Tibet and historical and ideological ties with the Communist Party of Nepal.¹⁶

Bhutan, a small yet strategically important nation, has long maintained a close and enduring bilateral relationship with India. This bond has been nurtured through collaborative efforts across various sectors, notably in education and culture. India not only stands as Bhutan's largest trading partner but also plays a pivotal role in its infrastructural development. However, recent territorial claims by China have disrupted the tranquility of this relationship. These claims, spanning an estimated 12 percent of Bhutan's territory, have injected a new dimension into the geopolitical dynamics of the region.¹⁷ The Chinese assertions are viewed as attempts to alter the existing status quo, placing significant strain on Bhutan's friendship with India. These developments carry profound implications for India's national security and territorial integrity.

Bangladesh emerges as the world's second-largest purchaser of military equipment from China, constituting nearly one-fifth of China's total arms exports between 2016 and 2020.¹⁸ Chinese weaponry comprises over 70 percent of Bangladesh's major arms acquisitions. Additionally, China's involvement extends beyond arms sales, encompassing investment in two ports in Bangladesh.¹⁹ Beijing aims to elevate bilateral strategic cooperation, a move particularly noteworthy amid Dhaka's recent differences with Washington.²⁰

As part of its BRI, China has finalized two major port projects in Sri Lanka: the Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City. These projects, secured through extensive lease agreements, have not only generated substantial economic gains for China but also strategically positioned it in the Indian Ocean. The Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka's largest Chinese-backed project, was acquired by China on a

¹⁶ Deep Pal, *China's Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

¹⁷ John Pollock and Damien Symon, "China's High-Stake Incursion in the Heights of Bhutan," *World Today* (blog), 29 September 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

¹⁸ Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers" (fact sheet, SIPRI, Mar 2021), <https://sipri.org/>.

¹⁹ Saeeduddin Faridi, "China's Ports in the Indian Ocean," *Gateway House*, 19 August 2021 <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/>.

²⁰ Ananth Kishan and K Bhattacharjee, "China says will back Bangladesh against 'external interference'," *The Hindu*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

99-year lease due to Sri Lanka's inability to repay its significant debt.²¹ Positioned strategically in the Indian Ocean, the port is part of China's broader geopolitical strategy to develop a "string of pearls" network of ports encircling India. Conversely, the Colombo Port City project is being transformed into a high-tech urban center, including an offshore international financial center, residential areas, and a marina, with ambitions to rival global financial hubs like Dubai and Singapore. However, the lease agreement for this project has sparked controversy, with China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) investing USD 1.4 billion in exchange for 43 percent of the land on a 99-year lease.²² These investments have not only extended China's influence in the Indian Ocean region and secured crucial maritime routes for energy supplies but also heightened concerns about Sri Lanka's mounting debt and the long-term implications of these projects.

From India's continental security perspective, according to Debendra Sanyal, "China's play in South Asia involves encircling India in the region, a strategy similar to that employed in the Chinese game *weiqi*, where the goal is to surround more territory than the opponent, thereby restricting the opponent's moving space."²³ As China continues to expand its coercive foreign policy, India finds itself compelled to navigate its engagement with China. Beijing's strategic deployments form distinct "outward arcs of expansion," extending over the waters of the East China Sea (ECS) and SCS, as well as across land in Indian territories such as Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh. Given these dynamics, India faces no alternative but to manage and confront China's growing influence in the region.²⁴

India's maritime domain presents distinct security dynamics. China has strategically established land routes, notably the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) terminating at Gwadar port, and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor linking to ports at Yangon and Kyaukpyu. These investments strategically position China to access both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, effectively encircling India's eastern and western coasts. Despite India's 15,000 km of land borders, which include 6,798 km of hostile borders with Pakistan and China, the

²¹ Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury, 'China, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Hambantota Port Project,' *St Antony's International Review* 15, no. 1 (2019): 153–64, <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Frédéric Grare and Jean-Loup Samaan, "The Advent of China's Indian Ocean Strategy," in *The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 15–41, <https://doi.org/>.

²² Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Colombo Port City: A New Dubai or a Chinese Enclave?," *BBC*, 16 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

²³ Debendra Sanyal, "China-Sri-Lanka Relations: A Game of Weiqi in the Subcontinent," Organisation for Research on China and Asia—ORCA, 7 August 2023, <https://orcasia.org/>.

²⁴ Diptendu Choudhury, *Security Vision 2047: A Hundred Years Since Independence* (New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, November 2022), <https://www.vifindia.org/>.

remaining 8,202 km shared with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar facilitate limited trade, highlighting the pivotal role of the Indian Ocean region (IOR) in India's future growth. India boasts a coastline stretching 7,516 kilometers, with its peninsula extending 1,980 kilometers into the Indian Ocean. This positioning grants India exclusive rights over an expansive area of 2.02 million square kilometers, with half of the basin lying within a 1,500 kilometer radius of the mainland and its island territories. The strategic significance of the IOR to India cannot be overstated, given factors such as geography, energy resources, trade routes, natural resources, sea lines of communication, security considerations, and regional geopolitics. Recognizing these imperatives, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has designated the IOR as a "policy priority," as reflected in India's maritime initiative Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).²⁵

Conversely, China views the IOR as vital to its economic growth, trade, and broader regional interests. At the core of China's maritime strategy lies its Malacca dilemma—the strategic importance of the Malacca Strait, a vulnerable chokepoint through which 80% of its oil imports pass.²⁶ Any threat to access through this strait raises significant concerns for China's energy and trade security. From India's security perspective, the Malacca Strait serves as a crucial link connecting the IOR to the SCS, highlighting the interdependence of the Indian Ocean and SCS in the region's strategic calculus.²⁷ Moreover, the SCS acts as a vital maritime connector between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, impacting both regions. China's expanding maritime reach is evident in the increased presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and activities such as antipiracy missions off the Somali coast and in the Gulf of Aden. China's extensive developmental investments in strategic ports and maritime bases, including Djibouti, Gwadar, Hambantota, and others totaling 13 in the region, bolster its shipping and submarine capabilities.²⁸ According to the Indian Navy Chief, the PLAN maintains a sustained presence in the IOR, with six to eight ships deployed at any given time.²⁹ Despite challenges in the ECS and SCS, the PLAN's increased presence in the IOR remains

²⁵ G. Padmaja, "Revisiting 'SAGAR'—India's Template for Cooperation in the Indian Ocean," National Maritim Foundation, 25 April 2018, <https://maritimeindia.org/>.

²⁶ Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma'," *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008): 143–61, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁷ Choudhury, "Salience of Airpower in Asian Waters."

²⁸ Faridi, "China's Ports in the Indian Ocean."

²⁹ Rajat Pandit, "Navy: India closely watching China-Pak collusion in IOR," *Times of India*, 2 December 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

apparent, emphasizing the enduring relevance of Alfred Thayer Mahan's insights on the Indian Ocean.³⁰

The New Great Game

In his August 2007 address to the Indian parliament, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe foresaw the convergence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans as catalysts for freedom and prosperity, envisioning a vast network spanning the Pacific and encompassing the United States and Australia. This strategic alignment between Japan and India marked a revival of their relationship based on shared values and interests, motivated in part by China's escalating belligerence and coercive foreign policy.³¹ Recognizing India's pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific, Abe elevated the country's importance in Japan's foreign policy.³²

In the early 2000s, the Indo-Pacific concept struggled to gain traction as global attention fixated on the scourge of international terrorism. During this time, China's actions regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea raised significant regional concerns.³³ Despite these actions, Beijing, cognizant of its military limitations, exercised strategic restraint. By positioning itself as an opportunity rather than a threat, China successfully assuaged fears among numerous Asian nations. During this period, Beijing's bold commitment to services liberalization upon joining the World Trade Organization sparked a notable shift in foreign direct investment toward service industries. By 2009, this shift had tripled investment in services and increased manufacturing by 81 percent, resulting in a surge of multinational corporations flocking to invest in China.³⁴

³⁰ Alfred Thayer Mahan, a renowned American naval strategist, emphasized the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, famously stating, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters." Mahan viewed the sea as a "great common," facilitating the flow of commerce and military force, with control of the sea intertwined with commercial, geographic, and military considerations. He advocated for peace as the paramount interest of great seafaring nations, as commerce thrives in times of peace and suffers during war. Today, Mahan's insights remain relevant, with control over strategic waterways essential for national security, economic prosperity, and geopolitical influence, shaping the maritime strategies of numerous nations. See Sibapada Rath, "Maritime Strategy of India and China: Influence of Alfred Thayer Mahan," *Naval War College Journal* 26 (2014): 71–79, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/>.

³¹ Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas" (speech, Parliament of the Republic of India, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 22 August 2007), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³² Sanjaya Baru, "Shinzo Abe and India: A Confluence of Minds," *The Wire*, 8 July 2022, <https://thewire.in/>.

³³ Manoj Joshi, "China is the potential threat No. 1, says George Fernandes," *India Today*, 18 May 1998, <https://www.indiatoday.in/>.

³⁴ "Foreign Direct Investment—The China Story," World Bank, 16 July 2010, <https://www.worldbank.org/>.

Amid accelerated military modernization and an 18 percent increase in defense budget in 2007, US Vice President Dick Cheney bluntly remarked that China’s “military buildup is not consistent with the country’s stated goal of a peaceful rise.”³⁵ The subsequent global financial crisis and ensuing US recession provided China with a strategic opening to assert its regional presence and influence. Adopting a more assertive stance, China began to assert its maritime territorial claims in the SCS, ECS, and along its borders with India.

From 2013 onward, Xi’s “Asia for Asians” security concept challenged US alliances, which Beijing viewed as the Achilles’ heel and a major impediment to a peaceful Asia, ushering in heightened strategic competition.³⁶ Beijing’s long-term strategy of steadily growing military capability and capacity is evident in its defense white papers spanning the past two decades.³⁷ Through aggressive leveraging of comprehensive national power, China aims to reclaim perceived territories and maritime spaces, promoting an alternative world order aligned with its Zhōngguó dream. Undoubtedly, China’s aspiration for great-power status is directed toward the United States, viewing dominance in Asia as a precursor.

Historically, China viewed India solely through the prism of its relationships with the Soviet Union and the United States, failing to recognize India’s inherent qualities or acknowledge its agency. Instead, Beijing regarded India as inferior and untrustworthy, particularly in light of ongoing territorial disputes.³⁸ Seeking to assert influence and control over South Asia, China was confident that it could resolve issues on its terms as it pursued its revanchist Zhōngguó dream of national rejuvenation.

However, India’s resolute response to Chinese aggression in the Doklam and Galwan border crises of 2017 and 2020–2021 underscores New Delhi’s stance that any disturbance of peace and tranquility along the border will significantly impact bilateral relations.³⁹ As US Indo-Pacific (INDOPACOM) commander ADM John Aquilino observes, China’s adoption of a 2021 land borders law allowing greater involvement of the PLA in border security represents a continu-

³⁵ “Cheney concerned about China and North Korea - Asia - Pacific—International Herald Tribune,” *New York Times*, 23 February 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

³⁶ Thomas F. Lynch III, James Przystup, and Phillip C. Saunders, “The Indo-Pacific Competitive Space: China’s Vision and the Post-World War II American Order,” in *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into an Era of Great Power Competition*, ed. Thomas F. Lynch III (Washington: NDU Press, 2020): 185–218, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

³⁷ Andrew S. Ericson, “China Defence White Papers—1995–2019,” blog, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/>.

³⁸ Vijay Gokhale, “A Historical Evaluation of China’s India Policy: Lessons for India-China Relations” (working paper, Carnegie India, 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

³⁹ “India-China relations can’t be normal unless border situation is: S Jaishankar,” *Mint*, 13 August 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/>.

ation of its lawfare strategy aimed at justifying military actions in territorial disputes. Moreover, China has significantly expanded its military infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control, intensifying pressure on India and enhancing its readiness for potential future conflicts. These actions, intended to expand borders and consolidate gains, contribute to regional instability and heighten the risk of unintended incidents.⁴⁰

The Indo-Pacific concept, stemming from the US Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, has evolved into the comprehensive US *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, aiming to bolster American presence and influence in the region. This strategy encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions, striving to cultivate a free and open Indo-Pacific, strengthen alliances, and counterbalance China's growing influence. Through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS trilateral with Australia and the United Kingdom, Washington seeks to manage strategic challenges posed by China's rise, promoting a rules-based international order, human rights, and regional cooperation.⁴¹

In May 2018, the rebranding of US Pacific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command underscored the pivotal role of the region and the burgeoning significance of India in the escalating US rivalry with China. India's consistent economic expansion, burgeoning geopolitical influence, and unwavering adherence to foundational principles, aligning with those of normative global powers, position it as a disruptor to China's dominance in Asia and a swiftly escalating strategic priority.

Vijay Gokhale asserts that China may need to come to terms with the existence of an alternate great-power triangle in the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific, excluding Russia. The United States and its allies in the region stand as the primary pillars of this triangle, with China as the secondary pillar and India as the third. Soon, no other nation or coalition, be it Russia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or the Gulf Cooperation Council, will possess the capacity to replace any of these key players, given their blend of economic strength and military prowess.⁴²

Chinese scholars' analysis since 2019 perceives the Indo-Pacific framework as a strategic maneuver by the United States aimed at imposing limitations on China's growth. According to this view, Washington seeks to constrain China's current development model, thereby maintaining and furthering its own asym-

⁴⁰ Statement of Admiral John C. Aquilino, US Navy, Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture," 18 April 2023, <https://armedservices.house.gov/>.

⁴¹ Li Li and Tianjiao Jiang, "From Conceptual Idea to Strategic Reality: 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' from the Perspective of Chinese Scholars," *Asian Perspective* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2023), 101–19, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴² Gokhale, *A Historical Evaluation of China's India Policy*.

metric advantages with the ultimate goal of prevailing over China.⁴³ In parallel, the US *National Security Strategy* identifies Beijing’s “ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power. . . . [and that] . . . Competition with the PRC is most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific.”⁴⁴

China’s aggressive exploitation of the abundant hydrocarbons, minerals, and fish resources in the SCS, encroaching upon the exclusive economic zones of neighboring nations, has fueled instability in the region. Recognizing its role as an Indo-Pacific power, the United States perceives the preservation of freedom of navigation and the cultivation of regional consensus for open access to the SCS as imperative. This strategic stance directly challenges China’s interests.⁴⁵

India’s strategic interests in the IOR and the United States’ interests in the broader Indo-Pacific, when viewed through the lens of a shared apprehension regarding China, naturally align them as partners. Their convergence is rooted in common democratic principles and a commitment to a rules-based international order, among other shared values.

While the United States’ regional concerns in the Indo-Pacific predominantly revolve around maritime issues, India faces a more immediate threat due to the simultaneous presence of two nuclear-armed adversaries, both of which enjoy a strategic partnership. India’s historical experience of enduring continental threats, including multiple conflicts with Pakistan and one with China, has now extended into the maritime realm. This shift is underscored by significant efforts to bolster the Pakistan Navy with Chinese support, along with increased bilateral maritime exercises between Pakistan and China.⁴⁶

The existence of a clear and present danger of conflict with these two neighbours is a harsh reality in the continental domain for India, a conflict it will have to “go it alone.” The reality of this tenuous peace, which can escalate to a conflict as it has in the past, often gets missed in the larger US-centric Indo-Pacific narrative.

Consequently, India seeks to maintain a distinction between its military engagements and exercises with Western and regional powers and its involvement in broader regional groupings and security frameworks. A robust and capable India

⁴³ Gokhale, *A Historical Evaluation of China’s India Policy*.

⁴⁴ *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, October 2022), 7 and 24, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁴⁵ *National Security Strategy*.

⁴⁶ Abhijit Singh, “Deciphering China-Pakistan naval exercises in the Indian Ocean,” *ORF*, 20 November 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

is essential for fostering stability and balance in Asia and beyond, as it offers a counterweight to the current geopolitical dynamics.

As Robert Kaplan contends regarding India, “Its great power status in the new century will be enhanced by its very political and military competition with China, even as it is pinned down by frontiers with weak and semi-dysfunctional states inside the subcontinent.”⁴⁷

China’s conduct in South Asia is influenced by its apprehension of inadvertently driving India closer to the United States’ sphere of influence. The prospect of an adversarial alliance along its extensive southwestern continental border presents a significant concern for China, as it would expose it to a two-front threat scenario. Conversely, the emergence of India and US allies as two formidable pillars in the region, with China occupying the third position, contributes to a broader normative framework.

Despite Beijing’s assertive rhetoric, the Quad’s unconventional structure, devoid of typical alliance formalities and characterized by its “informal, club-like nature,” elucidates its current operational dynamics and longevity. India’s deepening engagement with Quad partners, as highlighted by the Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar’s intriguing references to the “rediscovery of America,” “rising with the sun,” and “building a new mateship,” has significantly broadened. This expanded engagement spans across various domains, facilitating a comprehensive spectrum of interactions aimed at garnering mutual traction, learning, and shared experiences.⁴⁸

Considering the increasing significance of the Indo-Pacific, maintaining the Quad as a crucible for ongoing reinforcement by its members emerges as a prudent long-term strategy. This approach not only keeps China uncertain about its future implications but also ensures the flexibility for the group to adapt to any potential future contingencies.

Just a Maritime Game?

Up to this point, the discourse surrounding the Indo-Pacific has predominantly revolved around maritime affairs. This emphasis is unsurprising considering that seas have historically served as crucial conduits for transportation, trade, and diplomacy, acting as both a military asset and a diplomatic tool for colonial powers to assert political influence. Mahan famously likened the seas to a great highway or a vast common space, highlighting their pivotal role in facilitating easier and

⁴⁷ Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2013), 252.

⁴⁸ S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat Matters* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2024), 115–26.

more cost-effective transport compared to overland routes. He argued that control of maritime routes was indispensable for any nation aspiring to great-power status, with Britain serving as the quintessential example.⁴⁹

In addition to its significance for commerce and geopolitical influence, the maritime domain continues to be valued for its abundance of resources, territorial waters, rights of passage, and the vital principle of freedom of navigation. However, while maritime security remains a primary focus, encompassing the protection of commerce during peacetime and the safeguarding of sea lines of communication during wartime, the question arises: Can traditional surface-centric maritime power projection be effectively pursued in isolation?⁵⁰

During World War II, major naval powers came to the realization that air power was indispensable for achieving sea control and projecting maritime strength inland, leading to the emergence of carrier-based aviation.⁵¹ The limited speed, range, and operational capabilities of land-based aircraft in the past necessitated the integration of aircraft carriers into naval battle groups for effective sea control or denial.

The increasing recognition of the importance of the vertical dimension above the maritime domain, particularly evident in the contemporary Indo-Pacific context, is exemplified by developments in the SCS. This acknowledgment underscores the evolving nature of maritime power projection, where considerations of airpower and aerial dominance play an increasingly pivotal role alongside traditional surface-based capabilities.

Securing its coastal waters, the linchpin of China's economic prosperity, has remained a top national priority, leading Beijing to focus its strategies on safeguarding its vital maritime arteries—the two seas. The PLA Navy's assertive deployment to protect and expand China's maritime interests and influence in the region has been evident. However, Beijing has long recognized that achieving dominance in distant maritime domains necessitates airpower, particularly considering the threat posed by US carrier strike groups (CSG).

While China is aggressively bolstering its own carrier battle group capabilities, it still faces challenges in controlling the airspace over the SCS. The asymmetric airpower advantage enjoyed by US CSGs has historically disadvantaged the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). Nonetheless, the PLAAF's rapid modernization in recent

⁴⁹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1890* (1890, repr., London: Methuen, 1990), Chapter 1.

⁵⁰ Hedley Bull, "The New Environment: Sea Power and Political Influence," in *Sea Power and Influence*, ed. Jonathan Alford (Osman, UK: Gower and Allanheld, 1980), 4.

⁵¹ Huber Fiegl, "The Impact of Maritime Technologies," in *Sea Power and Influence*, ed. Jonathan Alford (Osman, UK: Gower and Allanheld, 1980), 28.

years has positioned it as a critical component of China's anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) strategy, furnishing both offensive and defensive capabilities. This strategy primarily aims to impede the effective deployment of US CSGs in the region.

The forward positioning of sensors and weaponry on China's artificial island bases reinforces the A2AD perimeter in the SCS, extending the range and coverage of its defensive umbrella. The PLAAF's operational patterns underscore the enduring principle of air power articulated by Giulio Douhet a century ago—the imperative of achieving air superiority.⁵² The PLAAF's swift advancements prompted Gen Mark Welsh, the US Chief of Staff of the Air Force, to caution the House Appropriations Committee in 2016 that China's aircraft inventory could rival, if not surpass, that of the United States by 2030.⁵³

Asserting irredentist sovereignty claims over island territories in the region under the pretext of reclaiming its “historical” spaces is a cornerstone of China's strategic approach. This stance led China to establish an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the waters of the ECS, encompassing areas disputed with Japan and Taiwan, in 2013, triggering international outcry.⁵⁴ While the PLAAF was unable to enforce the ADIZ at the time, the political declaration had significant ramifications. It emboldened the PLAAF to extend its air operations beyond mainland boundaries into maritime domains, marking a strategic shift from its previous focus on defense to a more assertive and offensive posture.⁵⁵

Subsequently, the PLAAF conducted multiple combat exercises over the Western Pacific Ocean and the SCS, signaling its heightened capabilities and intentions. The prospect of future ADIZ enforcement in the ECS and/or the SCS could have profound disruptive effects, particularly given the significant volume of civilian air traffic in Southeast Asia's aviation sector.

Contested sovereignty over regional airspaces would impact various facets of the aviation industry, including airlines, airports, and tourism supply chains. Civil aviation plays a vital role in the GDPs of Southeast Asian countries, with passenger traffic reaching 510 million in 2019, representing 11 percent of global air traffic, and attracting 144 million visitors, including 98 million arriving by air. This

⁵² Diptendu Choudhury “Expanding Role of PLAAF in China's National Security Strategy,” *Strategic Analysis* 44, no. 6 (2020): 521–41, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵³ Jeremy Bender, “US general: China's airpower will overtake the US Air Force by 2030,” *Business Insider*, 3 March 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.in/>.

⁵⁴ Alex Calvo, “China's Air Defense Identification Zone: Concept, Issues at Stake and Regional Impact” (working paper, Naval War College, 23 December 2013), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

⁵⁵ Arjun Subramanian, “PLAAF: Increasing Presence beyond the First Island Chain,” *CAPS in Focus*, 29 November 2016, <https://capsindia.org/>.

generates passenger traffic of approximately 196 million and accounts for about 17 percent of global international air cargo traffic.⁵⁶

The extensive presence of more than 300 regional airports offering scheduled commercial services, along with 60 Southeast Asian airlines operating scheduled passenger services utilizing 1,696 aircraft, and 21 Low-Cost Carriers managing a combined fleet of nearly 800 aircraft, underscores the potential for substantial disruption in the region. This abundance of infrastructure and air transportation resources presents a significant strategic leverage opportunity.⁵⁷ Utilizing its three artificial island air bases and its growing capability to enforce ADIZs, the PLAAF's land-based airpower will empower the PRC to intimidate, coerce, and exert heightened political pressure.

The impact of the PLAAF's expanded role as a coercive military tool is reflected in the significant increase in air violations of Taiwan's ADIZ, soaring by 79 percent in 2022 compared to 2021. In 2023, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense reported detecting a total of 4,679 Chinese aircraft in proximity to its airspace, with 1,674 intruding into its ADIZ.⁵⁸

Presently, routine violations typically involve one to five aircraft, while assertive violations typically entail six to nine aircraft. Reactionary violations, involving 10 or more aircraft and often linked to geopolitical developments, political signaling, or displays of force, accounted for 20.5 percent of violations in 2022.

Recent missions in the region have witnessed a surge in numbers, duration, and complexity, often featuring J-10, J-16, and J-20 fighters, H-6 strategic bombers, KJ-500 airborne early warning and command aircraft, and Y-20U tanker aircraft. The proliferation of routine violations and assertive air operations by the PLAAF has effectively nullified the unofficial Taiwan Strait centerline, a previously respected boundary intended to mitigate unintended tensions and apply pressure on the island's inhabitants.⁵⁹ This strategy by Beijing aims to establish "new normals," wherein routine violations over land, sea, and in the air are escalated to a level where they are perceived as commonplace, deliberately reshaping the status quo in boundary matters.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Hiroaki Yamaguchi et al., *Landscape Study on Southeast Asia's Aviation Industry: COVID-19 Impact and Post-Pandemic Strategy* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, May 2023), <https://www.adb.org/>.

⁵⁷ *Landscape Study on Southeast Asia's Aviation Industry Covid-19 Impact and Post-Pandemic Strategy* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, May 2023), <https://www.adb.org/>.

⁵⁸ Greg Waldon, "Fighters, ASW Aircraft Dominate China's 2023 Aerial Incursions against Taiwan," *Flight Global*, 3 January 2024, <https://www.flightglobal.com/>.

⁵⁹ Aquilino, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture."

⁶⁰ Ben Lewis, "2022 in ADIZ Violations, China Dials Up Pressure on Taiwan," *China Power*, 23 March 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

The US pullback in 2020 of its continuous bomber presence, a significant deterrent presence in the region for 16 years, aligns with the 2018 *National Defense Strategy's* emphasis on operational unpredictability. According to the US Strategic Command, "The US has transitioned to an approach that enables strategic bombers to operate forward in the Indo-Pacific region from a broader array of overseas locations, when required, with greater operational resilience."⁶¹

Despite the explanations provided, the expansion of the PLAAF's air operations, such as deploying long-range H-6 bombers armed with air-launched cruise missiles to Guam in the second island chain, has fostered the perception of a US withdrawal from the region, not solely aimed at reducing its vulnerable footprint. Over time, the increasing capabilities of Chinese weapons, systems, and platforms have heightened the vulnerability of US CSGs in the region, posing a more formidable threat than Japan did in mid-1944.⁶²

The existing medium-range access denial weapon systems are integrated with China's continuous surveillance intelligence, reconnaissance capability utilizing geosynchronous equatorial orbit (GEO) optical and synthetic-aperture radar (SAR) satellites to identify and track threats, a combination tailored to China's security priorities. The Yaogan-41 satellite notably enhances China's capability to detect and track not only naval vessels but also aircraft.⁶³

This suggests that while the US may currently employ its CSGs for power projection and signaling within the Second Island Chain region, doing so in a conflict scenario may not be operationally feasible.⁶⁴ In its annual report on Chinese military power last year, the Pentagon acknowledged the threat posed by DF-21s, cautioning that these missiles provide China with "the capability to conduct long-range precision strikes against ships, including aircraft carriers, out to the Western Pacific from mainland China."⁶⁵

Currently, the longest-ranged land-based combined anti-ship missile firepower of DF-26 ballistic missiles and bombers, capable of posing a threat to naval targets,

⁶¹ "The USAF Relocates B 52 and B 2 Stealth Bombers from Guam to USA," *Global Defense Corp*, 26 April 2020, <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/>.

⁶² Alistair Gale, "Aboard a U.S. Aircraft Carrier, a Front-Row Seat to China Tensions," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

⁶³ Clayton Swope, "No Place to Hide, A Look into China's Geo-Synchronous Surveillance Capabilities," CSIS, 19 January 2024 <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁶⁴ Kelley Saylor, *Red Alert, The Growing Threat to US Aircraft Carriers* (Washington: CNAS, 22 February 2016), <https://www.cnas.org/>.

⁶⁵ Ryo Nakamura, "U.S. 'Confident' Carrier Can Operate under China Missile Threat: Admiral," *Nikkei Asia*, 5 February 2024 <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

is estimated to extend up to 1,800 miles from the mainland.⁶⁶ This capability is one that China is likely to enhance in the future as it persists in prioritizing its goal of acquiring six aircraft carriers by 2035.

The traditional views and principles regarding the significance of maritime power require careful reconsideration for the future of the broader Indo-Pacific and IOR. While maritime power remains crucial, it is essential to accord equal importance to other emerging domains, particularly air, space, and cyber, given their increasing interconnectedness and interdependencies. Technologies such as hypersonic weapons, space glide vehicles, fractional orbital bombardment systems, early warning systems, antisatellite capabilities (including co-orbital systems), directed energy weapons, high-powered lasers, and space-enabled electronic jamming and cyber warfare have become integral components of the future threat landscape. As vulnerabilities in the maritime domain escalate, the once-dominant focus on maritime operations is no longer sufficient.

The historically undervalued vertical dimension has been rapidly overshadowed by technological advancements in the air and space domains over the past few decades. Therefore, it is imperative to reassess and broaden our perspective of the Indo-Pacific and IOR beyond a purely maritime lens. As future developments and advancements in land, air, sea, space, and cyber capabilities unfold, adopting a comprehensive multi-domain security approach becomes increasingly vital.

During the transitional phase until space and cyber security capabilities mature for collective regional implementation, the underutilized potential of land-based airpower in the Indo-Pacific and IOR represents a near and medium-term capability that warrants greater investment.

More Players in the Game

The scale of the PLAN's East and South fleets is significantly greater than the capabilities of regional navies. Beijing's aggressive utilization of its blue hull Maritime Militia and the China Coast Guard as part of a gray-zone strategy to advance its sovereignty interests amplifies the risk of maritime incidents, accidents, and conflicts that could disrupt the global supply chain and induce economic instability, adding to the complexity of the situation.

China's efforts to enhance its regional dominance extend beyond the maritime domain to encompass air, cyber, space, electromagnetic, subsurface, and emerging security domains such as the deep sea, quantum computing, artificial intelligence,

⁶⁶ Dimitri Filipoff, "Fighting DMO, Pt. 8: China's Anti-ship Firepower and Mass Firing Schemes," CIMSEC, 1 May 2023, <https://cimsec.org/>.

and biological security.⁶⁷ While developments in these new security domains are ongoing, the expansion of the PLA's land-based air power capability complements the PLAN's growing carrier capabilities.

China has expanded its presence and infrastructure across at least seven reefs and artificial islands in the Spratly Islands, including Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, Johnson Reef, Hughes Reef, Gaven Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Cuarteron Reef. Notably, Subi, Fiery Cross, and Mischief Reefs now feature airfields capable of supporting fighter operations, enabling the deployment of a variety of aircraft such as fighters, bombers, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, airborne early warning and control (AEWC) aircraft, tanker aircraft, and advanced surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. This enhances the PLA's ability to project power over both air and maritime spaces in the SCS and beyond, facilitating broader control of the airspace.

From a perspective of cooperative defense and regional security among Southeast Asian countries, nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam possess relatively small air forces characterized by a mix of aging and limited modern combat assets. In contrast, Singapore and Taiwan boast modern air force inventories. Individually, none of these nations can rival the capabilities of the PLA. However, all are undertaking efforts to modernize their air forces, recognizing them as perhaps the sole viable conventional hard-power option to bolster their limited maritime capabilities.

Collectively, these air forces represent an asymmetric instrument for asserting sovereignty against a dominant China in the nine-dash-line region, expanding the range of response options to counter its increasing capabilities.⁶⁸ India, the United States, and Australia are already engaged in various bilateral and multilateral air exercises with many of these nations, offering opportunities for further collaboration. It raises questions as to why this aerial dimension has been overlooked in maritime strategy.

The oversight of incorporating land-based airpower into the maritime security discourse has, to a degree, been a casualty of various factors. Firstly, domain-centric exclusivity has led services to vie for exclusive ownership of domains, overshadowing the potential integration of airpower. Additionally, navies historically maintain closer governmental engagement in executing foreign policies and addressing regional geopolitics linked with maritime nations. Moreover, the historical limitations

⁶⁷ Derek Solen, "Chinese Views of All-Domain Operations," China Aerospace Studies Institute, August 2020, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁶⁸ Diptendu Choudhury, "The Absence of Air Power in India's Security Narratives," Vivekananda International Foundation, 16 June 2021, <https://www.vifindia.org/>.

of airpower, including deficiencies in aerial refueling and long-range capabilities of combat platforms, hindered its prominence. The last significant exclusively maritime warfare involving airpower occurred during World War II. These factors collectively contributed to the oversight of recognizing the crucial role of land-based airpower in maritime security.

The recent consolidation of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) aviation assets, encompassing fighters, bombers, air defense, and air surveillance radars, under the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) signifies a strategic shift to streamline defensive operations and synchronize all air-based maritime strike capabilities.⁶⁹ This move underscores the pivotal role of land-based air power in China's present and future regional strategies. Furthermore, it acknowledges the critical importance of airpower in controlling the aerial domain within a joint multi-domain approach, emphasizing the need to strengthen service-specific core competencies without redundancy. The expanding influence of the PLAAF, reinforced by the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), across the Indo-Pacific and IOR, will soon be complemented operationally by the growing carrier capabilities of the PLAN.

Integrating land-based air power into the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific and IOR holds significant promise for enhancing regional security dynamics, particularly in light of China's comprehensive multi-domain strategy. Neglecting this aspect would be a strategic oversight.

Addressing the challenge posed by the long-range capabilities of land-based air power can be effectively managed through enhanced cooperative interoperability and shared use of assets and bases among partners, leveraging the operational locations organized by INDOPACOM. These locations, both permanent and rotational, form clusters that enhance regional defense capabilities.⁷⁰

In the past, most regional maritime exercises in the IOR were bilateral and essentially between Navies, with the inclusion of carrier-based air assets and integral ship-borne air power elements, while regional Air Forces carried out their air exercises independently.

Traditionally, regional maritime exercises in the IOR primarily involved bilateral engagements between navies, with limited involvement of carrier-based air assets and integral ship-borne airpower elements. Transitioning toward a more integrated

⁶⁹ Asian News International, "Major Restructure Sees PLA Air Force Take Over Naval Aircraft," *Economic Times*, 16 August 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>; and Rod Lee, "PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023," China Aerospace Studies Institute, July 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁷⁰ Aquilino, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture."

approach that combines the strengths of land-based airpower with aerial refueling and forward-staging capabilities is essential for enhancing regional security.

Likewise, the collaborative efforts of regional stakeholders to counteract potential threats in the domains of space and cyber present significant opportunities. Adopting an inclusive, all-domain approach involving the Quad and other multilateral engagements is essential for promoting stability and security. This approach aligns with the principles of equal access enshrined in international law, emphasizing the importance of freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful dispute resolution in common spaces across sea and air domains.⁷¹ Expanding beyond existing bilateral and multilateral maritime and air exercises, joint multinational exercises that capitalize on the diverse military capabilities of all participants are crucial for enhancing security in the Indo-Pacific and IOR.

In 2018, Prime Minister Modi expressed a firm stance: “We will work with others to keep our seas, space, and airways free and open; our nations secure from terrorism; and our cyber space free from disruption and conflict.”⁷² This belief creates an opportunity to develop a novel cooperative regional security framework involving all regional stakeholders and those with vested interests. This shared vision aims to foster an Indo-Pacific that is open, stable, secure, and prosperous for all.⁷³

End Thoughts

As the world’s most populous democracy and the second-largest nation in Asia, India’s economic and rising power trajectory inevitably positions it to either compete or contend with China’s Zhōngguó dream. The legacy of unresolved border issues and past wars with China and Pakistan, who share a strategic friendship and pose threats to India’s rise, create an uncertain geopolitical future. Beijing’s ambitions and Islamabad’s economic and political instability leave India caught between continental security threats and maritime strategic interests. In the past, these two realms were mutually exclusive, but with China’s expanding territorial and maritime reach, India must now balance the sovereignty of its land borders with the freedom of seas simultaneously.

The strategic nexus between the Indian and Pacific oceans, bolstered by shared ideals with like-minded nations, lays the foundation for collective action to counter Chinese assertiveness and dominance in Asia. Unless challenged and contained, China’s ambitions will not only shape an alternative geopolitical order on its terms

⁷¹ Narendra Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue June 01, 2018” (speech, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1 June 2018), <https://www.mea.gov.in/>.

⁷² Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue.”

⁷³ Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue.”

but also seek to exert influence across all domains, including space. A collaborative approach among nations committed to the security and stability of the broader Indo-Pacific region offers the most promising path forward. India's future strategic interests position it as a crucial partner in this collective and cooperative endeavor, while its unique security challenges require it to maintain readiness and flexibility.

Despite this dual challenge, the alignment of overarching ideals provides ample opportunity for India to actively engage with others in the future. Given the increasing blurring of boundaries between land, sea, air, space, and cyber domains, as well as their growing interconnectivity and interdependence, the domain-centric approach of the past will limit future outlooks and options. Effectively countering China's comprehensive security and strategic approach requires all stakeholders to leverage their respective domain strengths and adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach across multiple domains and contested spaces. 🌐

Air Marshal (Dr) Diptendu Choudhury, Indian Air Force, Retired

Retired Air Marshal Choudhury boasts over 38 years of distinguished service in the Indian Air Force (IAF), attaining the rank of three-star officer. With extensive experience exceeding 5,000 sorties on various fighter aircraft, including MiG-21 in all variants, MiG-27, MiG-29, and Sukhoi-30s, he held pivotal roles throughout his career.

Choudhury's leadership includes serving as the commandant of the Tactics and Air Combat Development Establishment (TACDE), recognized as the IAF's TOPGUN School, and fulfilling the role of air defence commander for two operational air commands. He commanded the IAF's Composite Battle Response and Analysis (COBRA) Group, assuming the responsibilities of Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Insp) at Air HQ, and serving as the senior air staff officer of the IAF's largest operational air command.

Internationally, Choudhury led the IAF in three significant exercises: Red Flag (USA), Desert Eagle (UAE), and Garuda (France). Academically, he is an alumnus of the Royal College of Defence Studies in the United Kingdom, holds a postgraduate degree in strategy and international security from King's College London, a Master of Philosophy in defence and strategic studies from Madras University, and obtained his PhD in political science from Osmania University, focusing on "Air Power as an Instrument of National Power: The Indian Context."

Choudhury contributes to education as an adjunct professor and academic mentor at the College of Air Warfare, having led the IAF's 2022 doctrine team. Additionally, he holds the esteemed title of distinguished fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, United Services Institute, and the Vivekananda International Foundation. He writes and speaks regularly on matters of strategy, security and air power. He has recently authored the book 'Indian Air Power: Contemporary and Future Challenges'. He retired from his final post as the commandant of India's National Defence College, New Delhi.

Inoculating Society against Authoritarian Influence in the Digital Age

Fortifying the Barracks against Authoritarian Cognitive Warfare

COL HSU MIN-CHENG, TAIWAN ARMY

Abstract

As authoritarian regimes increasingly employ sophisticated information warfare tactics, democratic societies face urgent challenges in countering cognitive influence operations. This article examines how entities like the Chinese Communist Party strategically disseminate misleading narratives through social media platforms to sway public opinion, erode trust in democratic institutions, and advance the People's Republic of China's geopolitical agendas. Leveraging techniques such as coordinated inauthentic behavior, algorithmic manipulation, and emerging technologies like deepfakes, these operations exacerbate societal divisions and undermine national resilience. Drawing insights from Taiwan's proactive countermeasures, the article explores whole-of-society approaches to enhancing media literacy, fostering societal resistance, and "vaccinating" the public against hostile influence campaigns. By strengthening cognitive defenses and fortifying the information environment, democratic nations can safeguard their values, uphold sovereignty, and maintain strategic advantages over revisionist authoritarian powers in an era of relentless information confrontation.

While the world's attention is drawn to the Israel– Hamas conflict and its repercussions on the Middle East and global dynamics, another arena of contention between Israel and Hamas emerges in the cyber and information domains, warranting acknowledgment. While Israel pursues conventional military strategies and Hamas employs insurgent tactics as a non-state entity, both sides actively engage in information warfare to provide a rationale for their actions and garner international support. This contest in the cyber and cognitive spheres by both factions underscores the significance of information warfare in contemporary conflicts.

Yet, a different narrative is gaining traction on social media, exerting a considerable influence, particularly within the global Chinese community. This narrative posits that the root cause of the Israel– Hamas conflict lies in the longstanding support provided by the United States to Israel, a significant non-NATO ally.

In fact, the United States recognizes Israel as one of its 18 Major non-NATO allies. In 2014, this recognition was further reinforced through the passage of H.R.938, the United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act, which increased additional support to Israel in defense, energy, and the enhancement of commercial and academic cooperation. Therefore, the US support for Israel is based on the legal recognition of Israel as a strategic partner in the Middle East.

The Narrative of Israel– Hamas Conflict on Douyin (抖音)

“战旗红” (Zhan-Chi-Hon) operates as an active creator account on Douyin, the Chinese equivalent of TikTok, boasting 475,000 followers. Furthermore, on the widely accessed Chinese media platform “今日头条” (Jin-Rih-Toutiao), it has amassed 473,000 followers and 3.93 million likes. However, Zhan-Chi-Hon is not authentic; it masquerades as a legitimate entity while disseminating disinformation to bolster Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology and propaganda.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Zhan-Chi-Hon creator account on Douyin

Despite claiming to be an exceptional creator specializing in Chinese military affairs, as of 15 December 2023, Zhan-Chi-Hon has uploaded 388 short videos addressing international military matters such as the Israel– Hamas conflict, the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the South China Sea dispute. However, content pertaining to the Chinese military and its analysis remains relatively scant.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Zhan-Chi-Hon creator account on Jin-Rih-Toutiao platform

According to the information on the Chinese recruitment website “Boss 直聘”(Boss Zhipin), the parent company of Zhan-Chi-Hon is Yunnan 战旗 (Zhan-Chi) Network Technology Co., Ltd. The founder and general manager of Zhan-Chi Network Technology is “欧阳治民”(Oyan-Zhimin). Based on the information disclosed on the website, Oyan-Zhimin is a graduate of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Kunming Army Academy who retired as a lieutenant colonel in the PLA. During his service, he worked as an editor at the 战旗报 (Zhan-Chi-Bao) military newspaper in the Chengdu Military Region. Following his retirement in 2020, Oyan-Zhimin established Zhan-Chi-Hon in China with the aim of actively promoting patriotism, heroism, and disseminating “positive red energy” on internet.



Figure 3. Screenshot of information about Zhan-Chi Network Technology on Boss Zhipin website. According to information disclosed (as showed in the call-out box), The Zhan-Chi company adheres to the character of Zhan-Chi-Bao newspaper and builds online media such as 兵说 (Bing-Shao) and Zhan-Chi-Hon to actively promote patriotism, heroism and spread “positive red energy”, which is credited by government authorities and loved by the majority of netizens. For more information, visit <https://www.zhipin.com/>.

The majority of the 388 videos published by Zhan-Chi-Hon convey a strongly biased and anti-American perspective. Some of the content seeks to mislead viewers, such as the portrayal of the November 2023 agreement between Israel and Hamas to temporarily cease fire and exchange prisoners. Zhan-Chi-Hon distorts these mutual concessions, depicting Israel as succumbing to pressure from the international community and making decisions due to setbacks in military operations, thereby endorsing Hamas and perpetuating false propaganda.

Numerous creators on Douyin, like Zhan-Chi-Hon, are producing videos attributing the Israel–Hamas conflict primarily to the long-standing support of the United States for Israel. These Chinese-language videos have not only inundated the Internet within Communist China but also spread across TikTok and various other social media platforms. The influence of these biased videos extends to

Chinese-speaking communities worldwide, shaping perceptions and even reaching other ethnic groups within the United States.



欧阳治民

总经理

公司创始人、法人代表欧阳治民，毕业于昆明陆军学院，服役20年，2020年退役，曾任成都军区战旗报社编辑、宣传处干事、师宣传科长等职，中校军衔，立二等功两次，三等功五次。参加汶川抗震救灾、中缅边境森林救火、四川芦山抗震救灾、中印陆军联训、国际侦察兵比武、中美人道主义救援演练等20余项重大军事活动，参与“时代楷模”王锐、排雷英雄战士杜富国等重大典型宣传，发表作品2200余件计120余万字，22件获奖，参与编写《红色大讲堂》等5部书籍，3件作品获全国报纸副刊奖，2件获解放军新闻奖等。

Figure 4. Screenshot of information about Oyan-Zhimin on Boss Zhipin website. According to information disclosed, in addition to his service in the PLA, Oyan-Zhimin is skilled in news reporting and propaganda work. He has received several awards from the PLA for his contributions.

Biased Narratives on Social Media Are Shaping the Perception of the Younger Generation

In November 2023, US Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) penned a letter to US Treasury Secretary and Chairwoman of the Committee on Foreign Investment Janet Yellen expressing concerns about TikTok's ability to influence the perceptions of the younger generation in the United States.

Senator Hawley also referenced a poll indicating that 51 percent of Americans aged 18 to 24 believe that Hamas' targeting of civilians was justified. Analysts concluded that a significant portion of young Internet users obtain information through TikTok, with the platform's abundance of anti-Israel content being a major factor in shaping young Americans' beliefs regarding the justification of Hamas' murdering of civilians.¹

In this case, several issues merit consideration. Typically, Internet users primarily serve as commentators and sharers of information, rather than creators of short videos and memes. The rationale is simple: producing informational content requires time and resources, and most regular Internet users do not invest in content creation without direct benefits.

So, who are the creators willing to invest time and resources, specifically targeting the Chinese-speaking audience? These creators argue that the long-standing support of the United States for Israel is the root cause of the Israel–Hamas conflict and endeavor to enlist civilians as their proxies. Their messages are explicit and aimed at sowing divisions among the American public. The critical question arises: who bears responsibility for disseminating such contentious and misleading information to influence or weaken US policies toward its allies and partners?

It Is Not the Only Case

The political landscape in Israel and its neighboring regions is intricately complex, influenced by historical legacies that give rise to diverse perspectives, interpretations, and occasionally biased viewpoints. However, when authoritarian states purposefully engage in information warfare to sway the political landscape or international environment, manipulate diplomatic channels, influence decision-making processes, shape public opinion in democratic nations, and even vilify opponents to stoke internal nationalism, it underscores a fundamental departure from the principles of freedom of thought and speech. So, how exactly do authoritarian states and terrorist organizations wage information warfare?

Perhaps we can glean insights from the dissemination of controversial and misleading information by the CCP concerning Taiwan during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, global attention has been focused on understanding the motives behind Russia's invasion, recognizing Ukraine's resilience, and evaluating the war's ramifications for sectors such as agriculture, energy, and geopolitics.

¹ Josh Hawley, "Hawley Renews Effort to Ban TikTok Following Rise in Pro-Hamas Content," US Senate website, 7 November 2023, <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/>.

In Taiwan, while these aspects are undoubtedly subjects of discourse, there is an additional narrative spreading across the internet. The Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG) conducted a study titled “Manipulated warfare: Ukraine bad, US bad, Russia good, abandon Taiwan” in 2022.² The research involved the collection and analysis of 276,000 Chinese online messages, posts, and news reports from November 2021 to February 2022, examining various narrative types and dissemination patterns. The study uncovered instances of information manipulation and political propaganda targeting the United States and Taiwan, with themes such as “The U.S. using Taiwan as a pawn” and “Today Ukraine, Tomorrow Taiwan.”

Furthermore, among the contentious messages circulating online is the assertion that if China were to initiate a conflict with Taiwan, the United States would unquestionably abandon Taiwan, commonly referred to as the “abandon Taiwan narrative.” Another narrative insinuates that the United States is utilizing Ukraine to undermine Russia via a proxy war.

Throughout the Russian invasion of Ukraine, narratives aimed at sowing discord in Taiwan–US relations and sentiments permeated Taiwan’s online sphere. These messages were amplified through political pundits, Internet influencers, and meme images to enhance their psychological impact. While most Taiwanese reject these arguments, these messages have nonetheless successfully reached their intended audiences.³

These controversial and misleading messages often originate from untraceable sources, and it would be imprudent to directly attribute all opposing views to information operations conducted by hostile or authoritarian states.⁴ However, it

² The Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (台灣資訊環境研究中心, IORG, originally named Information Operations Research Group), is a Taiwanese civil society organization dedicated to employing science and education to combat information manipulation, deepen comprehension of the Mandarin information landscape, foster rational public discourse, and fortify Taiwan’s democratic resilience. Founded in 2019 by media professionals, social scientists, data engineers, and activists in Taiwan, IORG is presently a registered legal entity in Taiwan, with its coordinating office situated in Taipei City. The referenced study can be found here: <https://iorg.tw/>.

³ The Institute of National Defense and Security Research commissioned the National Chengchi University Election Study Center to conduct a telephone survey from 23 to 29 March 2023. Respondents were asked the following questions: “Do you agree or disagree with this statement: U.S. military assistance to Taiwan will push Taiwan into war?” The survey results revealed that 60 percent of respondents disagreed, while 34 percent agreed. Additionally, respondents were asked, “If there is a war across Taiwan strait, do you think the United States will send troops to help Taiwan?” In response, 55 percent of respondents believed that the United States would provide assistance, whereas 37 percent believed it would not. See Liu Jieqiao, “國防民調呈現「疑美論」退燒及其省思,” Institute for national Defense and Security Research, March 2023, <https://indsr.org.tw/>.

⁴ Because democratic countries do not mandate real-name verification for Internet users and often maintain lax regulations and oversight concerning the personal information associated with accounts, authoritarian regimes and terrorist organizations frequently exploit this situation by deploying numerous fake accounts to disseminate false information.

may be feasible to identify such operations by observing patterns of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB).

Cyber and Information Threats from Authoritarian States

As explained in 2018 by Nathaniel Gleicher, head of cybersecurity policy at Facebook (META), CIB refers to the collaboration of groups of pages or individuals to deceive others about their identities or activities. Facebook took action against these networks or accounts due to their deceitful conduct, rather than the content they posted. Such behavior may stem from financial or ideological motivations.⁵

Additionally, Facebook released reports on CIB related to the PRC in 2019 and 2022. The 2019 report unveiled instances of CIB during the Hong Kong anti-extradition protests. Although attempts were made to conceal the identities of the involved users, investigations revealed links to individuals affiliated with the CCP government.⁶ The 2022 report focused on China and Russia. In the case of China, Facebook observed CIB activities targeting the United States, the Czech Republic, as well as Chinese- and French-speaking audiences worldwide. The report underscored a CCP-origin influence operation spanning multiple social media platforms, marking the first instance of such targeting US domestic politics ahead of the 2022 midterms, specifically aimed at Americans across the political spectrum. Previous Chinese influence operations primarily concentrated on criticizing the United States to international audiences rather than primarily targeting domestic US audiences.⁷

It is crucial to recognize that authoritarian states may exploit vulnerabilities in algorithms to ensure that controversial and misleading information reaches trending topics or is more readily accessible to users.⁸ FBI Director Christopher Wray testified before the US Senate Intelligence Committee in March 2023, acknowledging that Chinese-owned TikTok holds the power to shape narratives and sow division among Americans. He also highlighted that while TikTok is owned by a

⁵ Nathaniel Gleicher, "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Explained," *Facebook Newsroom*, 6 December 2018, <https://about.fb.com/>.

⁶ Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China," *Facebook Newsroom*, 19 August 2019, <https://about.fb.com/>.

⁷ Ben Nimmo, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China and Russia," *Facebook Newsroom*, 27 September 2022, <https://about.fb.com/>.

⁸ Trending topics gain popularity either due to coordinated efforts by users or in response to events that spark discussions on specific subjects. Occasionally, trending topics are influenced by concerted efforts and manipulations from fans of particular celebrities. However, there is increasing scrutiny on whether authoritarian states might manipulate algorithms or employ puppet accounts to advance specific agendas and ideologies.

Chinese private company, the CCP has the capacity to control and utilize relevant personal data.⁹

In January 2024, Taiwan successfully conducted its presidential election. However, in the months leading up to the election, concerns were raised about potential interference from the PRC. Mr. Wellington Koo (顧立雄), Secretary-General of Taiwan's National Security Council, outlined strategies for potential Chinese interference in the 2024 presidential election during a media interview prior to the election. These strategies include fostering a hostile atmosphere against the current ruling party by amplifying missteps in policy, promoting skepticism toward the United States, and exploiting fears of war.¹⁰

Mr. Koo also emphasized that the approaches employed could be varied. The CCP might establish multi-channel networks on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to collectively influence public opinion. Coordinated accounts might be utilized to disseminate misleading messages. Additionally, the CCP may create organizations to assist content creators in producing and disseminating specific videos, with creators often entering into such partnerships in exchange for commercial revenues.

Moreover, Mr. Koo expressed concerns about the use of artificial intelligence and deep-fake technologies to generate misinformation and distort people's perceptions of politics. He noted that the cost for the CCP to engage in such interference is relatively low, while the expenses required to counteract CCP influence could be exceptionally high. Furthermore, those responsible for the production of deceptive information often adopt a strategy of silence following initial dissemination, making efforts to trace their origin nearly impossible. This deliberate tactic aims to obfuscate their true identity and motives.

Tactics and practices in information warfare from extremist organizations or authoritarian regimes are growing increasingly sophisticated and yielding detrimental effects. It is noteworthy that certain social media platforms, such as TikTok, may not prioritize profit as their primary motive, they are driven by other factors beyond financial gain. These platforms may play a role in influencing or promoting policies and ideologies aligned with specific organizations or authoritarian states. Additionally, they may rely on disseminating disinformation to further their agendas.¹¹

⁹ Danielle Wallace, "FBI Director Chris Wray testifies Chinese-owned TikTok has power to 'drive narratives,' 'divide Americans,'" *Fox News*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/>.

¹⁰ Ching-en Chiou, "Lurking risks of Chinese influence in the presidential election coming up next year," *Radio Taiwan International*, 23 July 2023, <https://en.rti.org.tw/>.

¹¹ David Ingram and Kat Tenberge, "Critics renew calls for a TikTok ban, claiming platform has an anti-Israel bias," *NBC News*, 1 November 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>.

How Should Democratic Countries Respond?

While most democratic nations are aware of the threat posed by influence operations from authoritarian states, and there is a consensus on the importance of enhancing media literacy and fostering information resilience among the public, the real challenge lies in effectively implementing and executing these measures.

For the government and armed forces of Taiwan, countering cognitive and influence operations from authoritarian states is an urgent and imperative task. According to the Taiwan *National Defense Report* released in 2023, the CCP continues to infiltrate and engage in media and internet activities. CCP's strategy involves fostering internal division and stirring discord within Taiwan to undermine public trust in the government. The CCP's methods include hacking and infiltrating the Internet, disseminating controversial messages, propagating extravagant propaganda, utilizing United Front tactics, and employing deliberate distortion, direct falsification, wedge-driving, and provocation.¹²

The CCP manipulates contentious issues in Taiwan with the goal of fostering social divisions, undermining unity among the populace, diminishing the morale of the military, and seeking to cultivate an unfavorable international environment/opinion toward Taiwan. Presently, the CCP has integrated cognitive warfare tactics into its "Three Warfares" strategy, United Front Work, and national security intelligence endeavors.¹³ These tactics span various levels, encompassing individuals, organizations, the military, and the state, thereby broadening the scope of engage-

¹² The United Front is a political strategy and initiative of the CCP, involving individuals, groups, and networks that are controlled by the Party and utilized to further its interests. For instance, the United Front Work Department, headed by the chief of the secretariat of the CCP's Central Committee, oversees front organizations and their affiliates in various countries, such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Association.

¹³ The "Three Warfares" constitutes a strategic approach employed by the CCP with multifaceted objectives:

Public Opinion Warfare: This facet endeavors to shape public opinion both domestically and internationally. The PLA perceives the mobilization of the Chinese public as advantageous for signaling resolve and deterring foreign incursions on Chinese interests.

Psychological Warfare: Utilizing propaganda, deception, threats, and coercion, this component aims to influence adversary decision-making processes while countering adversary psychological operations.

Legal Warfare: This component seeks to leverage legal systems to dissuade enemy attacks. Utilizing international and domestic law to legitimize and garner support for initiating the conflict, and to legally designate the enemy's action as unlawful.

These strategies serve to promote the CCP's national interests and undermine its adversaries' capacity to respond effectively. They operate within a broader strategic framework emphasizing coordination across various domains and government entities to prosecute warfare effectively. The Three Warfares strategy is designed to wield political power. Gaining insights into hybrid warfare according to Party theorists' perspectives enables decision makers to comprehensively counter the CCP's coercive objectives without necessitating a response to each individual coercive action undertaken by the Party.

ment and increasing complexity.¹⁴ Moreover, the defense report also suggests that misinformation and disinformation may negatively impact the perception and morale of military personnel, as well as public support for the national military.

Hence, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) of Taiwan actively enhances its capabilities in swiftly detecting, reporting, verifying, responding to, and tracing misinformation. The MND proactively disseminates accurate information to mitigate the impact of misinformation on military and national security.¹⁵

In addition to conducting comprehensive research on the tactics and objectives of cognitive warfare, the Taiwan MND has implemented a range of countermeasures in recent years. The military news unit maintains continuous vigilance over domestic and international news, ensuring prompt clarification of misinformation to neutralize its negative effects. This endeavor aims to enhance public understanding of the armed forces, thereby fostering support for the military. Moreover, two common defense educational materials, “Let’s Serve! (從軍出發)” and “Mobilizing Immediate Combat Power (動員即戰力),” have been newly compiled to integrate the concept of cognitive warfare into education and training initiatives.¹⁶

To bolster media literacy among active-duty forces, the Political Warfare Bureau (PWB) of the MND has devised specialized educational programs introducing the cognitive warfare tactics employed by the CCP. These programs are aired on “Juguang Park TV sessions (莒光園地),” an educational TV program broadcast nationwide, reaching both active-duty forces and civilians.

The Taiwan government revised educational recall for reservists to 14 days in response to the recognition that the reserve forces required further training to effectively prepare for potential military threats from Communist China. Additionally, the PWB was tasked with developing an additional national defense education program aimed at enhancing the media literacy of reservists. Furthermore, there has been a reform in the enlistment training curriculum commencing in 2024. This overhaul entails an augmentation of training hours and content for new recruits, encompassing both compulsory and volunteer service, with a specific emphasis on delineating the tactics and desired effects of the CCP’s influence operations. The objective is to aid new recruits in enhancing their media literacy and mitigating the impact of cognitive warfare orchestrated by authoritarian states.

Moreover, the PWB has been actively fortifying national defense education for the general public during peacetime. The PWB conducts diverse patriotic

¹⁴ *National Defense Report* (Taipei, Taiwan: Ministry of National Defense, 2023), 41–42, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>.

¹⁵ *National Defense Report*, 163.

¹⁶ *National Defense Report*, 80.

and educational initiatives to bolster the populace's resolve to withstand threats from adversaries.

Major General Lou Wei-Chieh, director of the Cultural Publicity and Psychological Operations Division at the PWB, emphasized in a media interview in June 2023 that Taiwan plays a pivotal role in regional stability. He highlighted that the Taiwan military upholds principles of non-provocation and strives to avoid escalating conflicts, employing proactive measures to counter the enemy's cognitive warfare. Major General Lou underscored that the proactive measures adopted by the military do not equate to "offensive cognitive warfare." He emphasized that Ukraine's approach in shaping discourse and public opinion during its conflict with Russia serves as an invaluable lesson for Taiwan. The objective of proactive measures is to bolster societal resilience and foster mutual trust between the military and the public by projecting an image of well-trained and formidable armed forces in Taiwan.

Furthermore, various activities, graphics, and videos are utilized to instill confidence in the populace and mitigate the impact of cognitive warfare from the CCP. This approach resembles the concept of "vaccination" against Chinese influence, serving as a preventive measure to enhance immunity.¹⁷

Building Resistance and Resilience

The international landscape and geopolitical dynamics are evolving rapidly, with terms like resistance and resilience garnering significant attention in the global arena and serving as benchmarks for assessing a nation's strength. At the national level, resilience denotes the capacity of a healthy democratic society to withstand outside attempts by other countries or entities to manipulate the free will of its citizens. These influences encompass influencing voting behavior, shaping support for national policies and defense readiness, and swaying democratic values and beliefs. All free and democratic nations, including Taiwan, are currently confronting similar challenges.

Authoritarian states and extremist organizations, in their quest for global power and influence, exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in free speech within democratic countries. They achieve this by disseminating false information and promoting extremist rhetoric, with the objective of inciting and manipulating public opinion. The repercussions of these actions extend beyond impacting election outcomes; they deliberately disrupt and manipulate the decision-making processes surrounding public policies.

¹⁷ Tu Ju-min, "主動認知作戰抗中假訊息 樓偉傑少將：強化嚇阻增加軍民互信," *Liberty Times Net*, 23 June 2023, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/>.

While most democratic countries and their allies acknowledge the significance of comprehending the tactics employed by hostile forces in influence operations, as well as enhancing media literacy among the public, the true challenge lies in cultivating and implementing these capabilities effectively. The initiatives undertaken by Taiwan and its MND could serve as invaluable lessons and models for allies and like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region. 🌟

COL Hsu Min-Cheng, Taiwan Army

Min-Cheng Hsu is a colonel in the Taiwan Army and currently is a doctoral student in the National Defense University in Taiwan. His interest of research includes public policy, political communication, strategical communication, China studies, and data science. For more than 21 years of service, Hsu has worked in the Political Warfare and Information Operations Field in various positions. He served as political warfare and cadet counselor in company level from 2003 to 2011, commander of cadet company, public affairs staff officer in the Army Command Headquarters, political warfare section chief in 584 Armored Brigade, squadron commander of the Psychological Warfare Group, political warfare staff officer in Ministry of National Defense in Taiwan. Colonel Hsu holds a BA in journalism from National Defense University (Taiwan) and a Master of Public Policy and Management from University of Southern California.

Why Do Many Taiwanese Resist Unification with the People's Republic of China?

An Overview of Explanations

DR. DAVID J. LORENZO

Abstract

Why do a majority of Taiwanese prefer alternatives, including the continuation of the status quo, to unification with mainland China for the foreseeable future? Understanding the sources of this preference is important because tensions over Taiwan's refusal to unify with the mainland could spark a military conflict across the Taiwan Strait. This article offers an overview of the various explanations for this phenomenon. These explanations focus on Taiwanese identity, political aspirations for liberal democratic governance, and a "commitment problem" stemming from distrust of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The article concludes by discussing the enduring nature of this reluctance to unify, reviewing recent polling data on Taiwanese willingness to resist a PRC invasion, and providing recommendations to deter the PRC from resolving the Taiwan question through military force.

Authoritative guidance identifies the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as a crucial US interest.¹ Recent events, such as multiple military incursions by the armed forces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into Taiwan's airspace and maritime zones, have exacerbated tensions reminiscent of those witnessed in the 1950s.² Should such tensions escalate into a military conflict, the United States could find itself entangled in a war with the People's Republic of China (PRC), resulting in economic, political, and physical devastation across the region and the world.³

¹ *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022), 23, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>. For US interests in Taiwan, see Luke P. Bellocchi, "The Strategic Importance of Taiwan to the United States and Its Allies: Part One," *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (2023): 61–77, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

² See for example, Emily Feng and Connie Hanzhang Jin, "China is subtly increasing military pressure on Taiwan. Here's how," *NPR*, 18 December 2023, <https://www.npr.org/>.

³ For an overview of the economic impacts, see Charlie Vest, Agatha Kratz, and Reva Goujon, "The Global Economic Disruptions from a Taiwan Conflict," *Rhodium Group*, 14 December 2022, <https://rhg.com/>.

At the heart of the strained cross-Strait relations lies a fundamental disagreement between the people of Taiwan and the leadership of the CCP and the PRC. The CCP leadership views Taiwan as an integral part of a unified China, asserting itself as the sole legitimate government of the nation. It steadfastly adheres to a policy aimed at ensuring that Taiwan, both legally and practically, comes under the political dominion of the PRC. This stance serves as a cornerstone of the CCP's claim to political legitimacy, positioning the party as the sole entity capable of restoring China to its historical prominence and redressing the grievances of its "Century of Humiliation," which includes reclaiming territories lost during that time.

Legally enshrined in the 2005 "Anti-Secession Law," the PRC has articulated its policy of employing military force to prevent Taiwan from formally declaring independence. Xi Jinping, the paramount leader of the PRC, has signaled that the culmination of China's national rejuvenation would be the reincorporation of Taiwan under PRC control.⁴

Successive governments of Taiwan have consistently rebuffed the demands made by the PRC to bring Taiwan under its political control. This steadfast refusal underscores the enduring lack of popular support in Taiwan for integration with the mainland under the governance of the PRC and the CCP, even under the framework of "One Country, Two Systems" proposed by Deng Xiaoping. This proposal, succinctly described by William Overholt, would "allow Taiwan to keep its economic and social systems, government, and even military in return for acknowledging that it was part of the People's Republic."⁵

It is crucial to note that under this arrangement, Taiwan would merge with the mainland within a unified political entity rather than forming a confederation of distinct states. With the passing of the generation of mainlanders who migrated with the Republic of China (ROC) government to Taiwan in 1949 and the decline of the Kuomintang (KMT) as the predominant political force in Taiwan in the late 1980s, support in Taiwan for the historical goal of unifying China and Taiwan has waned. Since the early 1990s, most Taiwanese have rejected the notion of unification for the foreseeable future, largely preferring to maintain the status quo. Recent polling data confirms the persistence of this trend (see fig. 1).

⁴ See, Xi Jin-ping, "Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China" (speech, State Council Information Office, PRC, 1 July 2021), 11, <http://english.scio.gov.cn/>.

⁵ William Overholt, *Hong Kong: The Rise and Fall of One Country, Two Systems* (Cambridge, MA: Ash Center, Harvard Kennedy School, December 2019), <https://ash.harvard.edu/>. See also, Xinqi Su and Dene-Hern Chen, "Hong Kong Crackdown Turns Taiwan Against China Doctrine," *Barron's*, 15 January 2024, <https://www.barrons.com/>; "Majority Support 'Status Quo,' Poll Shows," *Taipei Times*, 21 November 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>; and "Taiwan Public Rejects 'One Country, Two Systems'" (press release, Mainland Affairs Council, ROC, 21 March 2019), <https://www.mac.gov.tw/>.

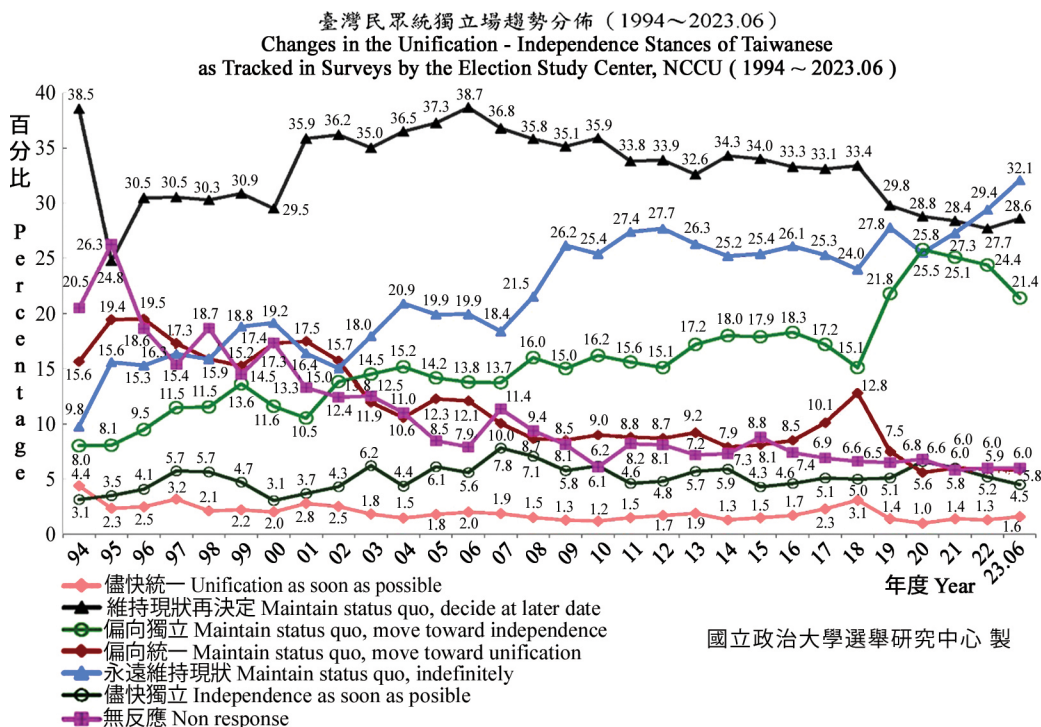


Figure 1. Changes in unification-independence stances of Taiwanese. (Source: Election Studies Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC.)

This chart highlights the fact that the PRC has been unable to compel or persuade the Taiwanese population regarding the necessity or desirability of embracing a PRC-sponsored “One China” construct.⁶ More than 80 percent of respondents to this poll either expressed support for maintaining the status quo indefinitely (which entails a de facto independent Taiwan), maintaining the status quo temporarily while deferring the unification question for the future, or maintaining the status quo while preparing for de jure independence. Options such as immediate unification or maintaining the status quo while preparing for eventual unification garnered support from less than 10 percent of respondents.

⁶ Even if these polling results potentially overemphasize backing for independence, they unmistakably demonstrate that the majority of the population does not endorse any form of unification in the near to medium term. Additional polling data indicating an even larger segment of the population supporting independence further supports this conclusion: Chung Li-hua and Jonathan Chin, “Poll shows 48.9% support independence,” *Taipei Times*, 2 September 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/>.

Although the results of the most recent presidential elections, when considered alongside these data, indicate some disagreement regarding the interpretation of a preference for the status quo, the overwhelming majority of those expressing a preference associated with the status quo view it as a distinct alternative to unification in the foreseeable future.⁷

Why does the majority of Taiwanese resist unification with the PRC? This article provides a comprehensive overview of existing explanations. One explanation points to a Taiwanese identity, shaped in part by the differing histories and experiences of Taiwan and the mainland, which categorically rejects unification with the mainland on any grounds. The second explanation highlights Taiwan's adherence to liberal democratic principles of governance and its inhabitants' refusal to accept that the PRC upholds or practices them. While not outright rejecting the possibility of unification with the mainland, this explanation underscores the condition that such a union would only be acceptable if the mainland underwent significant political reform.

The third explanation identifies a "commitment problem" rooted in distrust of the PRC's and CCP's sincerity in honoring promises should Taiwan's government express willingness to pursue a unification arrangement. This position again precludes unification with the mainland as long as the CCP and the PRC are part of any One China framework. These explanations intersect, as multiple factors may characterize the viewpoints of different segments of Taiwan's population.

The responses of the CCP leadership to these data are critical for maintaining stability across the Strait. In recent years, Taiwan's refusal to commit to a timetable for unification, coupled with its efforts to bolster defenses and assert de facto autonomy, has prompted the CCP to undertake a series of potentially destabilizing military actions. The frustration stemming from the realization that the likelihood of a voluntary union with Taiwan in the near to medium term is minimal could prompt the CCP leadership to escalate further and resort to military force to achieve its nationalist objectives. In such a scenario, recent data regarding the willingness of Taiwan's residents to resist an invasion becomes crucial, along with proposals for what actions US officials might take to deter the PRC from pursuing a military solution.

⁷ It is also notable that these data indicate the success of the PRC's efforts to dissuade Taiwanese from openly expressing a preference for declaring independence. However, recent polling suggests that a majority of Taiwanese now perceive independence as the most probable outcome, fueled by optimism regarding the United States' potential victory in the ongoing competition with the PRC. According to the poll, 58 percent believed independence was more likely, while 41 percent believed "cross-strait unification" was more probable. See Meng Chih-cheng, "Support for independence grows," *Taipei Times*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>.

Identity and Resistance to Unification

Taiwan's historical connection to classical China is tenuous. Initially inhabited by Austronesian people around 3,000 BCE, who comprised the majority of the island's permanent residents until the thirteenth century CE, Taiwan remained outside the sphere of Chinese authority. Significant migration from the mainland to Taiwan commenced in the thirteenth century, yet Chinese control over the island was absent during this period. During the 1600s, both the Dutch and the Spanish attempted colonization efforts on parts of the island. Though these endeavors had limited impact, they highlight the historical disregard of Chinese officials towards Taiwan and infrequent engagement with its inhabitants.

Official Chinese control over Taiwan commenced in the 1680s, when Qing dynasty military forces, suppressing die-hard Ming loyalists on the island, integrated Taiwan into the Chinese political system. However, significant Qing administrative presence or developmental efforts on the island did not materialize until the later part of the nineteenth century. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainland officials predominantly perceived Taiwan as a source of raw materials and a refuge for pirates, inhabited primarily by "savages" (the indigenous Austronesian peoples) and Chinese migrants, the latter often depicted unfavorably in Chinese cultural narratives.⁸

Taiwan's path toward integration into modern China was hindered by the late Qing dynasty's inability to maintain control over all Chinese territories. Following the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki stipulated that the Qing cede Taiwan to the Empire of Japan. This decision profoundly influenced Taiwan's historical trajectory and the formation of its people's identity.

Under Japanese rule, efforts were made to impose Japanese identity and culture upon the Taiwanese populace. These attempts led to tensions, fueling the emergence of an early Taiwanese identity movement that rejected Japanese identity and gradually distanced itself from a Chinese state perceived as having forsaken Taiwan's Chinese inhabitants.⁹

While Taiwan served as an agricultural outpost for the Japanese empire, the treatment of the Taiwanese was relatively less oppressive compared to the experiences of Koreans, Filipinos, and mainland Chinese under Japanese rule. The effects

⁸ For contemporary attitudes, see Yu Yonghe, *Small Sea Travel Diary* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2004).

⁹ Andrew Morris emphasizes the perception of abandonment that informed attempts by some Taiwanese elites to resist the Japanese takeover after the Qing accepted the Treaty of Shimonoseki. See Andrew Morris, "The Taiwan Republic of 1895 and the Failure of the Ching Modernizing Project," in *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan*, ed. Stéphane Corcuff and Robert Edmondson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–24.

of the Japanese presence in Taiwan persisted for decades after Japan's control ended, shaping the Taiwanese experience.

Furthermore, Taiwan's historical circumstances diverged from key events in modern Chinese history that helped mold contemporary political identity and social views on the mainland. It remained part of the Japanese Empire during pivotal moments such as the 1911 revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty on the mainland and the May 4th Movement of 1919, which expressed defiance against Japanese demands. Taiwan also remained insulated from the brutality of the Japanese occupation of mainland China during the 1930s and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Additionally, Taiwan did not participate in the military campaigns orchestrated by the Kuomintang (KMT) to unify the mainland in the 1920s and 1930s, nor did it experience the tumultuous relationship between the KMT and the Communists that culminated in the Chinese Civil War.¹⁰ The Taiwanese populace was also spared the hardships endured during China's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

Partially stemming from these divergent historical narratives and experiences, the Taiwanese perspective often contrasts with that of the mainland. Taiwanese residents frequently lack the antagonistic views towards Japan commonly held by many mainlanders, and many do not frame their identity within the context of memories of Japanese aggression or the broader Century of Humiliation. Moreover, Taiwan's younger generation tends to embrace a cosmopolitan outlook and is receptive to fostering connections with other East Asian communities.¹¹

In addition, the Taiwanese interpretation of their history diverges significantly from the version of Chinese history accepted and taught on the mainland. While narratives emphasizing China's decline in power and prestige, and its humiliation by foreign powers, including Japan, prevail in mainland education, Taiwan's educational materials extract the island's history from that of China. They underscore Taiwan's multicultural reality and integrate Chinese history into a broader regional context.¹²

Furthermore, despite efforts by the Kuomintang (KMT) government, which assumed control of Taiwan in 1945, to instill a Chinese identity among several generations of Taiwanese, suppress expressions of Taiwanese identity, and quash calls for independence, these endeavors did not effectively establish an exclusive Chinese identity among the majority of Taiwanese.

¹⁰ For a useful discussion of these historical contributions to a Taiwanese identity, see Ho Ming-sho, "Desinicizing Taiwan: The Making of a Democratic National Identity," *Current History* 121, no. 836 (2022): 211–17, <https://homepage.ntu.edu.tw/>.

¹¹ These assertions are based on the author's observations.

¹² Lyu Zhaojin and Zhou Haiyan, "Contesting Master Narratives: Renderings of National History by Mainland China and Taiwan," *China Quarterly* 255 (2023): 768–84, <https://doi.org/>.

First, the KMT's governance over both Taiwan and the mainland lasted only approximately four years (from 1945 to 1949). Taiwan's separate administration from the mainland since 1895, except for this brief period, means that Taiwanese residents lack a recent extensive history of concrete political ties with the mainland.

Second, the KMT government's perceived favoritism towards mainlanders, insistence on reasserting Chinese identity, culture, and the Mandarin dialect over popular objections, and its readiness to oppress marginalize, discriminate, and use force against the Taiwanese people poisoned perceptions of mainlanders, Chinese identity, and the One China concept among a significant portion of the population. The characterization of Chiang Kai-shek (the KMT president who ruled Taiwan from 1945 until his death in 1975) and his associates as colonizers further fueled the development of a contemporary Taiwanese identity that harbors enduring anti-Sino sentiments.

These characteristics defined the identity that emerged during Taiwanese political and social resistance to KMT rule, beginning in the mid-1940s and persisting through Taiwan's transition to democracy in the 1990s and up to the present day. They also characterized the identity of university students who spearheaded recent associations like the Sunflower Movement, protesting economic measures implemented by the KMT government as part of its engagement policy with the PRC in the 2010s.¹³

Furthermore, following the democratic transition both official and unofficial entities in Taiwan have played a role in fostering the development of a distinct Taiwanese political identity. Successive governments, including those led by the KMT, have encouraged allegiance to an ROC, which, despite residual language in the constitution, governs and only claims to govern Taiwan and associated islands.¹⁴

The impact of these factors on identity is evident in recent polling data. While it has never been universal for all Taiwanese to adopt a singular Taiwanese identity, the proportions of those identifying as Taiwanese or Chinese have varied over time. Current data indicate that the overwhelming majority of Taiwan's population no longer identifies solely as Chinese. Approximately 60 percent now reject a Chinese identity altogether, marking a substantial increase since 1992, while less than 5 percent maintain an exclusive Chinese identity, representing a notable decrease from 1992 (refer to fig. 2).

¹³ Anson Au, "The Sunflower Movement and the Taiwanese National Identity: Building an Anti-Sinoist Civic Nationalism," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 27 April 2017, <https://berkeleyjournal.org/>; also Ho, "De-sinicizing Taiwan."

¹⁴ Dalton Lin, "'One China' and the Cross-Taiwan Strait Commitment Problem," *China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 1094–116. <https://doi.org/>.

We would anticipate that embracing a Taiwanese identity would lead individuals to oppose unification efforts. First, the mainland holds little appeal given the dearth of shared understandings and experiences. Second, there is a sense of aversion. Embracing a *non-Chinese* identity signifies a preference for a state and political system that aligns with Taiwan’s unique history and experiences, rather than being overshadowed by an unfamiliar identity associated with a contentious past. Public opinion studies confirm these expectations, revealing strong correlations between Taiwanese identity and opposition to unification. Most significantly, individuals who identify solely as Taiwanese are much more inclined to reject unification proposals compared to those with either a mixed Taiwanese/Chinese identity or a Chinese identity.¹⁵

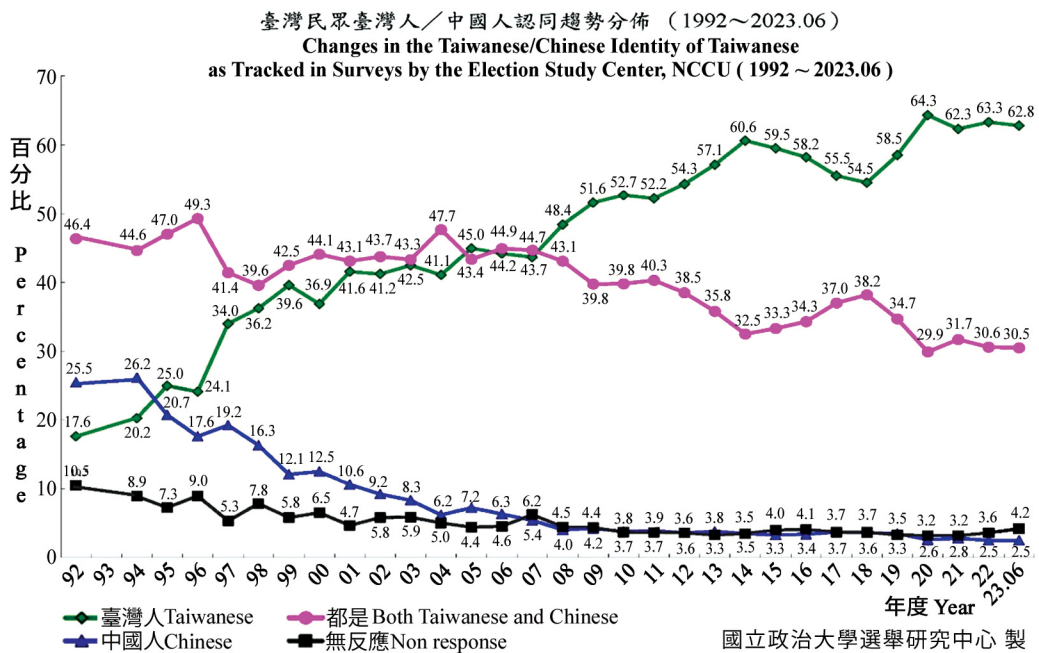


Figure 2. Changes in Taiwanese/Chinese identity of Taiwanese. (Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC.)

¹⁵ See Wang Te-Yu and Liu I-Chou, “Contending identities in Taiwan: Implications for cross-strait relations,” *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004): 568–90, <https://doi.org/>. For later discussions that confirm these findings, see Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, “In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative,” *Pew Research Report*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>; Timothy Rich and Andi Dahmer, “Taiwan Public Polling on Unification with China,” *China Brief*, no. 18 (2020), <https://jamestown.org/>; and Chen Yu-Jie, “‘One China’ Contention in China-Taiwan Relations: Law, Politics and Identity,” *China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 1025–44, <https://dx.doi.org/>.

Political Views and Resistance to Unification

Political perspectives represent another significant factor in Taiwan's resistance to unification. Even prior to Taiwan's transition to democracy, the prevailing political discourse challenged the legitimacy of the PRC government on ideological grounds. Despite their own authoritarian tendencies, leaders like Chiang Kai-shek maintained that the KMT regime adhered to Sun Yat-sen's principle of popular sovereignty and aimed to eventually establish a democratic system across China. This narrative, disseminated through various speeches and educational campaigns, established a standard that, at the very least, called for a form of democracy characterized by substantial accountability to the populace.¹⁶ This stance established a foundational expectation regarding democracy that many in Taiwan believe the PRC does not and cannot meet.

With Taiwan's transition to a liberal democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s, this expectation and the corresponding criticisms of the PRC's regime have intensified. Despite the imperfect nature of democratic governance and the liberal ethos on the island, Taiwanese residents now experience significantly greater economic and political freedoms compared to those on the mainland.¹⁷ Many individuals in Taiwan have grown accustomed to the elections, freedoms, and rights afforded by a liberal democratic system.¹⁸

Shelley Rigger and her colleagues contend that while identity remains significant, the primary factor driving Taiwanese reluctance to unify lies not solely in cultural disparities, but rather in political values that Taiwanese do not associate with the PRC. These researchers conclude that many Taiwanese believe "they are citizens of a state that is not the PRC. What makes their state different from the PRC—and from Taiwanese states in the past—is that it is a liberal democracy, one built and sustained by Taiwanese themselves." Due to this disparity, numerous Taiwanese harbor negative sentiments toward the PRC government. Moreover, they perceive the PRC as hostile toward Taiwan and actively seeking to

¹⁶ These expectations probably assisted democratic learning in Taiwan and helped set the stage for Taiwan's democratic transition. See my *Conceptions of Chinese Democracy: Reading Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Chiang Ching-kuo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). For specific examples, see "Answers to Questions Submitted by Albert Kaff, Manager of UPI Taipei Bureau, Oct. 22, 1959" in *Selected Address and Messages of President Chiang Kai-shek in 1959* (Taipei: Good Earth, 1960); and "New Year's Message for 1963," *Free China Review*, February 1963.

¹⁷ All major surveys of democracy hold that Taiwan is a liberal democracy. For a recent overview, see Kharis Templeman, "How democratic is Taiwan? Evaluating twenty years of political change," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 2 (2022): 1–24, <https://www.tfd.org.tw/>.

¹⁸ See Frédéric Krumbain, "The human rights gap in the Taiwan Strait: How China pushes Taiwan towards the US," *Pacific Review* 35, no. 3 (2022): 383–414, <https://doi.org/>.

undermine its political institutions. As a result, those who hold such views naturally lack the desire to unify with the mainland as long as the PRC and its ruling CCP remain in power.¹⁹

Distrust of the PRC and Resistance to Unification

A third explanation references distrust.²⁰ In this interpretation, the reluctance to unify with the mainland stems not only from identity and political disparities but also from Taiwanese skepticism regarding the PRC officials' dedication to upholding their promises regarding the unification process and its aftermath. It could be argued that this skepticism arises not only because of the emergence of a distinct Taiwanese identity and disparities in political values but also as an independent factor. Even if the population were to overcome issues related to identity and political preferences, some would still oppose unification due to their lack of confidence in the PRC's credibility.

This distrust stems from observations of bad faith exhibited by PRC officials. Many in Taiwan were disillusioned by the failure of Taipei's efforts to engage with the PRC between 2008 and 2016 under then-President Ma Ying-jeou's KMT government, which did not result in the anticipated changes in PRC behavior as promised. Instead, despite public assurances of fostering engagement, PRC officials implemented policies aimed at limiting Taiwan's international space and gaining political and economic advantages. Numerous Taiwanese, especially university students, also perceive these officials as exploiting steps toward greater economic integration by seeking control over Taiwan's economy and media. Additionally, revelations of PRC misinformation campaigns targeting Taiwan's public opinion have further fueled distrust.²¹

This lack of trust in PRC and CCP officials specifically concerns their ability to uphold promises necessary to address issues of identity and political governance. If a Taiwan government and the PRC were to reach an agreement incorporating a version of One Country, Two Systems, ensuring that Taiwan could maintain its

¹⁹ Shelley Rigger et al., "Why is unification so unpopular in Taiwan? It's the PRC political system, not just culture," *Brookings*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/>. For a comparison with Hong Kong, see Syaru Shirley Lin, "Analyzing the relationship between identity and democratization in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the shadow of China," in *Democratization, National Identity and Foreign Policy in Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (New York: Routledge, 2021).

²⁰ The argument holds that the mistrust operates on both sides of the Strait. See Lin, "'One China' and the Cross-Taiwan Strait Commitment Problem'."

²¹ Chien Li-chung, "PRC targets Taiwan with new disinformation ploy," *Taipei Times*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.taipetimes.com/>; and A.A. Bastian, "China Is Stepping Up Its Information War on Taiwan," *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

governing system and preserve current rights and freedoms—essential components for any successful negotiation outcome from the Taiwanese perspective—would PRC officials honor such assurances? Or would they disregard their commitments, using the demands they impose on Taiwan—such as formal acceptance of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan and an irreversible commitment to unification governed by a strict timetable—as leverage to isolate Taiwan from allies and set the stage for unification on PRC terms? Alternatively, might they initially adhere to the process but later impose authoritarian policies on Taiwan?

The spectacle of the PRC undermining the rights, freedoms, and autonomy of Hong Kong's citizens under the same One Country, Two Systems model, despite promises to refrain from interference in Hong Kong's affairs for 50 years following its reversion in 1997, has only reinforced skepticism regarding the PRC's trustworthiness.²²

Conclusion

The preceding discussion highlights various factors contributing to resistance to unification, which can overlap but also operate independently. Identity is shaped by political values but is not solely determined by them, whereas political values derive support from identity but are also influenced by other aspects of Taiwan's history. Skepticism, likewise, may stem from identity and political values, but it can also be influenced by recent developments. Eliminating one source of resistance does not guarantee an overall reduction in resistance.

In contrast, while Taiwan's population has increasingly moved away from an immediate desire to unify with the mainland over the past 25 years, or to engage in a close relationship allowing significant mainland involvement in Taiwan's economy (as evidenced by the Sunflower Movement), a significant majority of people on the mainland express a desire for unification. Recent polling indicates that while large-scale military force is their least preferred method for achieving this objective, a majority still supports such action. Additionally, majorities favor other coercive measures, while an even larger majority rejects Taiwan independence.²³

²² For discussions of the impact of the events in Hong Kong on Taiwan's trust in the PRC, see Overholt, *Hong Kong*; Chih-Jou Jay Chen and Victor Zheng, "Changing Attitudes toward China in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Xi Jinping Era," *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 250–66, <https://doi.org/>; and Ja Ian Chong, David WF Huang, and Wen-Chin Wu, "'Stand up like a Taiwanese!': PRC coercion and public preferences for resistance," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 24, no. 2 (2023): 208–29. <https://doi.org/>.

²³ See Adam Y. Liu and Xiaojun Li, "Assessing Public Support for (Non) Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 33, no. 145 (2024): 1–13, <https://doi.org/>.

Given the hurdles posed by public opinion in Taiwan to the PRC and CCP leadership's aspirations for imminent and voluntary unification, the evident implication is that, unless significant developments occur in the PRC or Taiwan, the likelihood is increasing that those leaders will need to pursue their unification goals through coercion, potentially resorting to military force. The central question arises: how long will they tolerate their success in deterring Taiwan from declaring independence before succumbing to frustration over their failure to achieve unification and resorting to military action? One answer, based on statements from Xi, suggests a timeframe of 25 years. However, a more pessimistic analysis points to less than 5 years, given the CCP's stated objective of developing the military capability to execute a successful invasion of Taiwan by 2027.²⁴

If the CCP leadership does indeed resort to military force, how would the Taiwanese populace react? Polling conducted immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine indicated that as many as seven in ten Taiwanese would actively resist an invasion.²⁵ However, more recent polling data suggests that only 30% would do so, while indicating that a majority would support the government's implementation of military mobilization policies akin to those observed in Ukraine. This stance prevails despite a majority expressing skepticism regarding Taiwan's ability to resist an invasion independently, doubting that the Taiwan government has taken the necessary steps to defend the island,²⁶ and lacking confidence that the United States would deploy military forces to assist in Taiwan's defense.²⁷

These data have the potential to influence the decisions facing US policy makers for the next several decades. The prospect of Taiwanese resistance to a PRC invasion suggests a scenario wherein US officials could face pressure to intervene militarily in support of Taiwan. Advocates of such action would highlight the

²⁴ This discussion assumes that Xi remains in control of the CCP and that future leaders will embrace the CCP's historical One China policy. A variety of domestic and international factors would also influence decisions to use force as well as any timetable.

²⁵ See "Sixty percent are willing to fight if China invades: poll," *Taipei Times*, 22 May 2022, <https://www.taipetitimes.com/>; and "30% more Taiwanese willing to fight for country after Russian invasion of Ukraine: 70% Now Willing to Defend Taiwan Against Invasion From China," *Taiwan News*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/>.

²⁶ "Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS)" (Taipei: Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica, December 2022), <https://sites.duke.edu/>.

²⁷ "August 2022 Public Opinion Poll – English Excerpt" (Taipei: Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation, 16 August 2022), <https://www.tpof.org/>. Roughly 44 percent of those polled believed the United States would intervene with troops, while 48 percent did not. This represents a significant decline in confidence. For an overview of earlier polling results, see Yuan-kang Wang, "Taiwan public opinion on cross-strait security issues: implications for US foreign policy," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 93–113, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

determination of the Taiwanese people to defend their homeland and argue that the United States has a responsibility to aid fellow democracies facing aggression. Moreover, a crisis prolonged by Taiwanese resistance could afford the United States the opportunity to deploy military forces to the region before Taiwan is conquered, undermining arguments suggesting that the United States is powerless and should accept Taiwan's forcible return to the mainland as a *fait accompli*.

However, it is conceivable that Taiwanese resistance to a PRC invasion could be weakened by economic considerations. One strategy employed by the PRC is to promise Taiwan's future economic prosperity under a unified regime, targeting Taiwanese business interests and historically supported by the PRC's economic success.²⁸ Another tactic involves exerting economic pressure. A Taiwanese population enduring an extended economic downturn caused or exacerbated by mainland coercion may be less inclined to defend the status quo and more receptive to the PRC's incentives or susceptible to further coercive and military measures.²⁹

Given the US policy objective of preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and promoting the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue with the consent of both sides, US policy makers have worked diligently to deter the PRC from invading Taiwan. The significance of this endeavor has been amplified in recent decades by Taiwan's expanding role in the global economy, its strategic location along crucial trade routes, and its adherence to liberal democratic values.

There are notable parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates that authoritarian revisionism remains a contemporary concern. Neither Ukraine nor Taiwan has a formal defense pact with the United States or its allies, despite their strategic importance. This circumstance likely factored into Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. However, there may be differences between the two situations. Unlike Ukraine, Taiwan may not be as susceptible to invasion due to its lack of a land border with the PRC. Conversely, the PRC may not be as susceptible to external pressure as Russia. While observing the impact of international sanctions on Russia may give pause to CCP leadership considering replicating Russia's actions, the PRC's larger and more diversified economy may give them confidence that they could reconstruct their economy to weather economic repercussions. Threats of sanctions cannot serve as the sole deterrent for the United States in discouraging the PRC's military intentions toward Taiwan.

²⁸ John Dotson, "What is the CCP's Plan for 'Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem?'," *Global Taiwan Brief* 7, no. 3 (2022): 7, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

²⁹ This is in part suggested by Tse-Min Lin, Chun-Ying Wu, and Theodore Charm, "When Independence Meets Reality: Symbolic and Pragmatic Politics in Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2023): 1–22, <https://doi.org/>.

Various forms of deterrence can compensate for Taiwan's absence of formal defense alliances and aid US policy makers in potential intervention scenarios. Despite lacking alliances, Western military support for Ukraine's resistance has prolonged the conflict, inflicted significant losses on Russia, and cast doubt on the success of Putin's endeavors. Taiwan's historical and current readiness to resist a hostile takeover suggests it could mirror Ukraine's situation in the eyes of PRC leaders. This underscores the importance of ongoing efforts to equip Taiwan with arms and training and suggests that more should be done to escalate the perceived costs to the PRC of a forcible takeover. Additionally, given that a PRC military seizure of Taiwan threatens key US national interests, such as economic concerns and political values, policy makers should reinforce recent clarifications of US policy, emphasizing a commitment to defend Taiwan against unprovoked PRC aggression.³⁰ The implicit message to the PRC should be that it would confront not only the United States but also a substantial portion of Taiwan's population in the event of an invasion.

Actions on the other side of deterrence—reassurance—are equally necessary.³¹ Messaging to the PRC should stress that while the US supports Taiwan's desire to resist coerced unification, it does not endorse hostility toward the mainland or unilateral declarations of independence by Taiwan.³² Furthermore, it should convey that if the PRC abandons its aggressive intentions toward the island, its security will not be compromised. While avoiding concessions regarding Taiwan's neutralization or "Finlandization,"³³ assurances could be given that there are no plans to utilize Taiwan as a base for offensive kinetic operations against the PRC.³⁴ Finally, the United States should underscore the importance of responsible global citizenship. PRC adherence to the current Rules-Based International Order, rather than pursuing its revisionist nationalist agenda in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, would alleviate tensions in Asia, reduce friction with the United States and its allies, and foster US willingness to engage with the PRC on mutually beneficial economic and trade matters. 🌐

³⁰ For example, "Biden Says US will Defend Taiwan if China Attacks," *BBC*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

³¹ For the importance of reassurance on this topic, see Bonnie S. Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence." *Foreign Affairs*, 30 November 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

³² Steve Holland, Nandita Bose and Trevor Hunnicutt, "U.S. does not support Taiwan independence, Biden says," *Reuters*, 13 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

³³ Bruce Gilley, "Not So Dire Straits: How the Finlandization of Taiwan Benefits US Security," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (January–February 2010): 44–60, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

³⁴ Such a position is in keeping with the previous US interpretation and application of the mutual defense treaty it held with the Republic of China from the mid-1950s until 1979.

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A Free and Open Indo-Pacific in 2040?

Democracy, Autocracy, and What Is in Between

DR. BENJAMIN REILLY

Abstract

The Indo-Pacific's future is often depicted as a battleground between democracy and autocracy, reflecting a geopolitical struggle between visions of free and repressive world orders. Initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue envision a “free and open” Indo-Pacific, assuming a deepening of democratic governance. This article explores the feasibility of such deepening within and among Indo-Pacific democracies in the near future. It assesses the current and prospective prevalence of democratic and autocratic regimes in the Indo-Pacific today and in the likely future, and the growing prevalence of “illiberal”, semi-democratic regimes in the region. Additionally, it examines the implications of a region split three ways between a mostly-democratic maritime East Asia, a mostly autocratic East Asian mainland, and a South Asia hovering between the two. The article concludes with a re-evaluation of the democratic peace theory—a cornerstone principle in international relations, but one which may need to be re-evaluated in the light of the regional trend towards illiberal democracy.

A recurrent framing of Indo-Pacific futures foresees a region cleaved between democracy and autocracy. The 2017 US *National Security Strategy* predicts “A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order . . . taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.”¹ The concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” pioneered by the late Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, with China as an implicit focal point, has spurred novel forms of minilateralism among the “four great democracies” of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.² “We strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion” announced the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) leaders in 2021.³ The 2022 US *Indo-Pacific*

¹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 45, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

² “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Opening Remarks at the Quadrilateral Ministerial Meeting” (remarks, Melbourne, Australia, 11 February 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

³ “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad’” (press release, The White House, 12 March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>, emphasis added.

Strategy similarly places democratic alliances at the core of its five objectives—“an Indo-Pacific that is open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure.”⁴

Given such aspirations, it is pertinent to ask whether a strengthening in democratic governance and a deepening of ties among Indo-Pacific democracies is feasible in the years to come. Prior to the advent of the Quad, democracy was not historically a basis for effective regionalism in the Indo-Pacific, unlike Europe or the Americas.⁵ In contrast to the NATO model, establishing a democratic security community in the Indo-Pacific entails uniting vastly diverse cultures and even civilizations—Western and Asian—a significantly greater challenge. However, the reality of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as an aggressive autocracy, willing and able to undermine the liberal order, has underscored the importance of taking regime type more seriously as the cornerstone for collective action. The PRC presents the region and the world with an alternative governance model based on one-party rule, which sacrifices rights and freedoms for the promise of political stability and unimpeded development. Considering this, what are the prospects for an Indo-Pacific “democratic security diamond,” as initially envisioned by Shinzo Abe?

To answer this, we must first establish a clear definition of *democracy*. The term suffers from significant misuse and overuse; when even North Korea is officially a “Democratic People’s Republic”, the word can mean everything and nothing. Hence, most scholars adhere to what Samuel Huntington called a “modest meaning of democracy,” primarily emphasizing the institutional mechanisms enabling the selection and alteration of governments through popular suffrage.⁶

This minimalist definition encompasses three fundamental criteria: meaningful *competition* for political authority among individuals and organized groups; inclusive *participation* in the selection of leaders and policies, preferably through free and fair elections; and a level of *civil and political liberties* adequate to safeguard the integrity of political competition and participation.⁷

⁴ “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States” (fact sheet, The White House, 11 February 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁵ Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Why Is There No NATO in Asia?: Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism,” *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (2002): 575–607, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Modest Meaning of Democracy” in *Democracy in the Americas: Stopping the Pendulum*, ed., Robert A. Pastor (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1989), 11–28.

⁷ Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, “Introduction: What Makes for Democracy?” in *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy*, ed., Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), xvi.

The latter criterion further enables us to distinguish between mere electoral democracies and more developed “liberal” democracies. *Electoral democracies* are those where the electoral process functions to establish majority rule under basic standards of political and civil liberties: if a government can be ousted through elections, then it can be classified as an electoral democracy. *Liberal democracies*, however, extend beyond this point: they not only elect leaders freely and fairly, but also constrain them. Moreover, robust and autonomous institutions ensure that all citizens, including minorities, receive equitable treatment under the law.

This distinction holds particular significance in the Indo-Pacific region, which boasts numerous electoral democracies where majority vote determines governmental control, but relatively few liberal democracies where the rights of all citizens, whether majority or minority, are respected and safeguarded both in law and in practice.

Presently, only the established democracies of Australia, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, and the United States, alongside Taiwan, Timor-Leste, and select smaller Pacific Island nations, meet the threshold of liberal democracy, even under a lenient interpretation of the term.⁸ Notably, Taiwan emerges as Asia’s foremost liberal, inclusive, and representative democracy across numerous metrics, despite lacking juridical statehood.⁹ Historically, Washington has maintained a stance of accepting any resolution negotiated between Taipei and Beijing, provided it is peaceful and enjoys the consent of the Taiwanese people. However, the consent of the populace is precisely what democracy demands, a principle the PRC cannot abide. Thus, any annexation of Taiwan by the mainland, whether through coercion or alternative methods, would mark the demise of this bold and thus far successful experiment in Sinic democratic governance—a model that directly challenges the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ideology and perspective. Moreover, such an action would signify a significant stride toward PRC dominance in East Asia, carrying dire ramifications for the United States and its democratic allies within the region.

While a potential PRC annexation of Taiwan represents the most significant singular threat to Indo-Pacific democracy, it is not the sole concern. Presently, numerous Asian nations that appeared a decade ago to be progressing toward fractious yet authentic electoral democracies, with prospects for liberal advancement, have regressed toward repression and illiberalism. This category includes nations such as the Philippines, the oldest democracy in Southeast Asia, which witnessed a drastic shift toward populism and lawlessness during the tenure of

⁸ *Freedom in the World 2022* (New York: Freedom House, 2023).

⁹ For example, Taiwan has been the topped-ranked Asian democracy by the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index in recent years.

former President Rodrigo Duterte. Similarly, another US treaty ally, Thailand, has experienced extended periods of military rule since the coups of 2006 and 2014, interspersed with sporadic instances of competitive elections. In the recent May 2023 Thai general election, the opposition Move Forward Party secured the highest vote share, yet was obstructed from assuming power due to the presence of 250 military-appointed senators.

Indonesia, the world's third-largest electoral democracy following India and the United States, stands as one of the rare instances of representative democracy within the Muslim world. However, under President Joko Widodo's leadership, Indonesia too has taken a more illiberal trajectory—a trend likely to persist under the administration of the newly elected President Prabowo Subianto, a former general. Instances of discrimination and violence against minority groups, the politicization of blasphemy laws, and entrenched systemic corruption have contributed to escalating religious intolerance and the erosion of independent governing institutions. Added to this is the regime's readiness to coopt individuals who publicly critique democracy itself, with Prabowo being a notable example.¹⁰ His resounding victory in Indonesia's February 2024 presidential election, coupled with the appointment of Widodo's son Gibran as vice-president, hints at a potential resurgence of multigenerational political dynasties dominating Indonesian politics once again.

As these instances illustrate, the regime type of numerous Southeast Asian nations could be characterized as *quasi-democratic*. Among these, perhaps the most enduring example of quasi-democracy is Singapore. Despite boasting higher levels of development than any other country in the region, including the United States, Singapore has never witnessed a transfer of governmental power. It and neighboring Malaysia for many years adhered to a comparable model of elections that were nominally free but not genuinely fair. In both cases, internal security regulations, electoral manipulations, a compliant judiciary, and a pro-government media facilitated the incumbent's retention of power. Tactics such as defamation lawsuits and other legal intimidations have been employed to silence critics and dissuade challengers, exemplifying a form of governance characterized as rule *by* law rather than the rule *of* law. While this model largely remains intact, Malaysia underwent a surprising change of government in 2018 and is now under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, a former senior minister and one-time prisoner during the now discredited Barisan Nasional regime.

¹⁰ Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall. "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (August 2019): 255–85, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

These cases speak to long-running debates about the nature of Asian democracy. During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars engaged in a broad comparison between Western and Asian democracy, characterizing the Asian variant by the soft authoritarianism exemplified by Singapore and Malaysia, as well as transitional cases like South Korea and Taiwan.¹¹ Arguing that liberal democracy was a Western imposition, long-serving Asia leaders such as Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia justified the curtailment of civil liberties and restrictions on democratic competition during their rule by referencing the perceived dangers of disorderly, contentious, and identity-focused politics should control be relaxed. *Benevolent authoritarianism*, they contended, was preferable for maintaining social stability, selecting meritocratic elites, establishing stable long-term policy frameworks, and fostering economic development.

Fareed Zakaria coined the term *illiberal democracy* to delineate this political model, wherein elected administrations garner popular support while routinely disregarding constraints on their authority and impeding their citizens' fundamental freedoms.¹² This model is analytically and substantively different to that of one-party autocracies such as China, where competitive elections and rules-based contestation for power are anathema. Under illiberal democracy, by contrast, elections are conducted and the façade of democracy upheld, allowing opposition parties to participate and occasionally secure seats, albeit seldom enough to pose a credible threat to the incumbent's grip on power. Simultaneously, freedoms of speech and assembly are curtailed, with government critics encountering harassment and facing legal reprisals aimed at stifling free expression and undermining the vitality of even moderately dissenting voices.

Presently, a distinctive manifestation of illiberal electoral democracy seems to be taking shape in India and other South Asian nations, blending elements of the Southeast Asian model by employing legal intimidations to silence dissent and dissuade opposition, alongside populist appeals to identity, religion, and culture. Under the unabashedly Hindu nationalist stance of Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's longstanding principles of accommodating its diverse cultural fabric have been supplanted by a cruder form of majority rule. With successive landslide election triumphs, the BJP has honed a brand of populist politics wherein dissenting voices are either marginalized, intimidated, or silenced. Crucial checks and balances, including judicial autonomy, press freedoms,

¹¹ Mark R. Thompson, "Whatever Happened to 'Asian Values'?", *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 4 (October 2001): 154–65, <https://doi.org/>.

¹² Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997): 22–43, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

and civil liberties, have been progressively undermined. Consequently, there has been a palpable erosion of checks and balances, restrictions on freedom of expression, and growing apprehension among religious minorities.

BJP ministers have vociferously pushed back against criticisms of India's democratic decay under Modi's leadership and launched attacks on independent democracy assessment entities such as Freedom House and Sweden's V-Dem Institute, which have downgraded India to statuses of "partly free" and "electoral autocracy," respectively.¹³

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are treading a comparable path. In Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has secured a series of overwhelming election triumphs, portraying herself as a technocratic figure akin to Lee Kuan Yew. The political landscape in Dhaka has long been dominated by two dynastic political factions led by Hasina and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, hindering the emergence of a more accountable democratic system. Similarly, Sri Lanka has embraced a dynastic politics model, both historically and more recently under the Rajapaksa brothers, Mahinda and Gotabaya. They rose to prominence by quashing the protracted Tamil insurgency through decisive military action, subsequently fostering close ties with China in exchange for substantial infrastructure projects such as the Hambantota Port. Once renowned as a beacon of democracy in South Asia, Sri Lanka's governance increasingly mirrors the illiberal autocracies prevalent elsewhere in the region. Presently, not only India but nearly all of South Asia, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, is classified as "partly free" or "not free" by Freedom House.¹⁴

Elsewhere, the Indo-Pacific region encompasses a diverse array of autocratic governance models. Alongside China, which by any metric stands as one of the most effective autocracies in history, are the "China lite" one-party communist systems of Vietnam and Laos. Furthermore, there are sultanistic regimes prevalent in Central Asia, as well as the oppressive family dynasty of North Korea, which holds the distinction of being the world's most authoritarian state. Other forms of autocratic rule include Cambodia's familial quasi-autocracy, with long-serving prime minister Hun Sen recently handing power to his son Manet; Myanmar's brutal military junta, which overthrew the re-elected National League for Democracy government in 2021; as well as one of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies in Brunei.

¹³ *Freedom in the World 2022; V-Dem, Defiance in the Face of Autocratization: Democracy Report 2023* (Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2023), <https://www.v-dem.net/>.

¹⁴ *Freedom in the World 2022*.

This presents a mixed and possibly confusing picture, with lots of variation and little consistency, and underlines the point that there are very different kinds of autocratic regime. Like democracy, too often autocracy is treated as a binary concept rather than a spectrum. Yet there are some clear patterns discernible. As we contemplate the trajectory of the region in the coming decade, it is imperative to question the direction in which the trendlines are presently moving.

The Geography of Democracy in Asia

First, let us delve into the geographical distribution of democracy in Asia. Since at least the end of the Cold War, there has been a clear maritime bias to the distribution of democratic governance in East Asia: with the exception of Mongolia, all of the region's electoral democracies—from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in the north to the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Timor-Leste in the south—are littoral, insular or peninsula archipelagic states. If we encompass Australia and New Zealand, this correlation becomes even more pronounced. Most of these democracies along the Pacific rim maintain primary security ties with the United States, including the US treaty allies such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Transitioning from maritime to mainland East Asia, China emerges as the central player, both today and over a very long history. Consider the profound historical legacy of China's "tribute" relations with its southern border states. Under Mao Zedong, the CCP also influenced the Leninist political trajectory of other one-party states like Vietnam and Laos, while continuing to exert significant influence over the military regimes of Thailand and Myanmar, as well as Cambodia.¹⁵ Presently, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China not only amplifies its sway over these bordering states but also pursues broader dominance in East Asia. This entails threatening democratic Taiwan, exerting pressure on Japan, oscillating between rewarding and penalizing neighbors such as South Korea and Vietnam, establishing military installations in the South China Sea, and endeavoring to undermine US alliances.

Finally, in South Asia, India casts the longest shadow, exerting both positive and negative influences on the trajectory of democracy in its neighborhood. However, India's impact differs significantly from that of China or the United States. India's fraught and complex relations with Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as its uneven relationships with much smaller Nepal, Sri Lanka,

¹⁵ Benjamin Reilly, "Southeast Asia: In the Shadow of China," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 1 (January 2013): 156–64, <https://doi.org/>.

and Bhutan, make broad generalizations challenging. India has never actively sought to export its political system and, in fact, has been a somewhat ambivalent advocate of democracy, despite for decades being the developing world's standout example. In recent years, its internal shift away from the broad-tent inclusionary governance of the Congress Party to a more explicitly Hindu-oriented BJP has been the subject of much attention from commentators—albeit not necessarily from Western governments, which have largely played down India's drift towards illiberalism in deference to its role as a counterweight to China. Consequently, the emphasis on democracy in US Indo-Pacific policy and within the Quad's identity has, paradoxically, “also created a permissive space for illiberalism and democratic erosion in India, alongside tolerance for diversity in domestic governance models across the region.”¹⁶

Looking Ahead

Over the next decade, it is foreseeable that the major powers—India, China, and the United States—will endeavor to sustain their dominance and considerable influence within their respective spheres of South Asia, mainland East Asia, and maritime East Asia. This continuity also implies that the prevailing regime types in each region will likely endure, characterized by a more democratically-leaning maritime East Asia, firmly tied to the US alliance, juxtaposed with a predominantly autocratic mainland East Asia that remains under China's influence. South Asia is the wildcard: hugely populous, diverse, and underdeveloped, democracy has never been stable there, but neither has outright authoritarianism. The multifarious countries of South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region may well be the swing states between autocratic and democratic futures for the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Assuming regime continuity in the United States, alignment between the United States and other Indo-Pacific democracies is also likely to persist. While the prospect of a second Trump administration may raise concerns among some allies, historical precedent indicates that, at the very least, security collaboration among allied democracies will remain a focal point of US foreign policy in Asia, irrespective of the governing administration.¹⁷ Even during the Trump years, notwithstanding the president's own reservations regarding a values-driven foreign policy, key figures within his administration such as James Mattis and Michael Pompeo

¹⁶ Kate Sullivan de Estrada, “India and order transition in the Indo-Pacific: resisting the Quad as a ‘security community’,” *Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (2023), 3, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁷ Michael Green and Dan Twining, “Democracy and American Grand Strategy in Asia: The Realist Principles Behind an Enduring Idealism,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 1 (April 2008): 1–28, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

staunchly defended Indo-Pacific democracy and condemned Chinese autocracy, a stance they maintain to date. For instance, Mattis recently asserted that the Quad “is grounded in common interests among the most important democracies in Asia. And it offers the best opportunity to lead a robust values-based partnership in the Indo-Pacific for those democracies and other like-minded nations . . . the real test of the Quad will be how it actually helps uphold the rule of law and stabilise Asia.”¹⁸

Since 2020, President Joe Biden has restored a more traditional US approach—prioritizing democratic allies, convening two Summits for Democracy, and renewing the focus on shared values. In the administration’s 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, strengthening and advocating for democracy are accorded significant prominence, to the extent that some analysts perceive it as the core objective of a comprehensive whole-of-government grand strategy for US diplomacy in the foreseeable future.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, the propagation of liberal values in Asia, though intermittent, provides the United States with a competitive advantage over China, affirming democracy promotion as a fundamental US interest.²⁰ However, this objective is undermined by the evident decline in the United States’ own democratic standing in recent years, measured against the same standards it applies to others—such as the imperative for peaceful transitions of power and the recognition of the freedom and fairness of electoral processes.²¹

As for China, it can be anticipated to persist in its support for North Korea and allied states like Cambodia and Pakistan, while resisting any developments that may bring democracy closer to its borders. For instance, it will continue to impede prospects for a unified Korea and the potential deployment of US forces in the region. Yet, akin to the United States, China’s primary challenge lies domestically. The unchallenged supremacy of the CCP hinges on its sustained performance legitimacy as well as its now well-developed ability to thwart and punish any threats to its authority. Despite numerous prognostications of its downfall, the CCP remains deeply entrenched today, with potential internal dissent or collective action closely monitored by an extensive surveillance apparatus. With a membership exceeding 90 million, the CCP is intricately interwoven into Chinese commerce and society, and despite recent economic setbacks, is likely to remain so. Nonetheless, it will need to evolve and relax some of its more egregious social controls in

¹⁸ James Mattis, Michael Auslin, and Joseph Felter, “Getting the Quad Right Is Biden’s Most Important Job,” *Foreign Policy*, 10 March 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

¹⁹ Roger Cliff, *A New U.S. Strategy for the Indo-Pacific*, Special Report No. 86 (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asia Research, June 2020), <https://www.nbr.org/>.

²⁰ Michael Green and Dan Twining, “The Strategic Case for Democracy Promotion in Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

²¹ Thus, the Freedom House and V-Dem rankings that downgraded India also downgraded the United States.

the years ahead. Indeed, while Xi Jinping has dismissed the whole concept of competitive elections as “Western ideas,” he has also pledged to pursue the objective of “democracy with Chinese characteristics” by 2049, coinciding with the centenary of the PRC’s founding.

For years, comparative scholars have predicted that as China grows richer its politics will liberalize.²² With a current per capita income of around USD 20,000 on a purchasing power parity basis—and even higher in coastal regions—China already surpasses income thresholds typically associated with democratic transitions.²³ Given the widely acknowledged role of the middle class—“no middle class, no democracy”—this should carry significant implications.²⁴ However, China’s burgeoning middle class seems to have predominantly accepted, and even endorsed, the paradigm of economic liberalization without corresponding political reforms. Surveys indicate that, especially among those with entrenched ties to state institutions, China’s middle class tends to exhibit greater allegiance to the CCP and less inclination toward democratic principles and institutions than their income levels would suggest—rendering them more frequently an adversary rather than an advocate of liberalization efforts.²⁵

Given this context, the prospect of regime change in China seems remote. China’s economic prowess, coupled with its status as the primary trade partner for most Indo-Pacific nations, will bolster assertions that its autocratic political system, unlike messy democracy with its time-consuming checks and balances, can get things done more expediently. To the extent that China wins this debate, the repercussions will extend far beyond its immediate vicinity. Globally, the world has witnessed a “democratic recession” since 2006, characterized by a steady rise in illiberal regimes and outright autocracies, alongside a decline in genuine democracies.²⁶ This erosion of democratic principles is evident across all regions, including the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, beyond the broader trend toward illiberalism, the faltering of once-promising democratic movements in Myanmar and Thailand, coupled with the persistence of autocracy in China, Vietnam, and other locales, underscores

²² Henry S. Rowen, “The Short March: China’s Road to Democracy,” *National Interest* 45 (Fall 1996): 61–70, <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Larry Diamond, “Why East Asia—Including China—Will Turn Democratic Within a Generation,” *The Atlantic*, 24 January 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

²³ Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁴ See Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

²⁵ Jie Chen, *A Middle Class Without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁶ *Freedom in the World 2022*.

the challenges of transitioning from military or other forms of authoritarian rule to authentic democratic governance. Nonetheless, democracy has seemingly solidified in South Korea and Taiwan, and appears poised to surpass the 25-year milestone in Timor-Leste and Indonesia—each of which was previously under autocratic rule.

Looking forward, the central question, as mentioned earlier, revolves around Taiwan's capacity to uphold its current status and remain a genuine democracy in the face of relentless pressure from China. Any regression from democracy in Taiwan would not only be strategically catastrophic but would also bolster claims of superiority by autocratic regimes. Although internal political polarization poses challenges and certain aspects of Taiwanese democracy remain subject to domestic contention, Taiwan has demonstrated remarkable resilience against Beijing's threats, intrusions, and "political warfare."²⁷ This resilience will be indispensable in the years ahead, particularly given the Democratic Progressive Party's triumph in the January 2024 elections is expected to provoke retaliation from the PRC.

Elsewhere, considering that China and some other authoritarian regimes in Asia have consistently defied the predictions of *modernization theory*—which posits that autocracies will transition to democracy once their income and development levels reach a certain threshold—it is plausible to anticipate that rapidly developing autocracies like Vietnam will likewise struggle to liberalize. On the other hand, comparative scholarship has also found that increasing incomes bolster the resilience of established democracies against external challenges, thereby diminishing the probability of these democracies regressing into authoritarianism.²⁸

Therefore, we should not expect many cases where a fully-functioning democracy turns authoritarian in any Indo-Pacific nation, nor vice versa. Absent regime collapse, North Korea is not going to become a liberal democracy; New Zealand will not turn into a military dictatorship. Rather, the most important ongoing trend in the Indo-Pacific is likely to be the steady shift towards more illiberal, quasi-democratic politics already seen in much of South and Southeast Asia. We can expect to see more dominant ruling parties endeavoring to sustain their authority through populist rhetoric and identity-driven mobilization, while simultaneously curtailing dissent from academia, civil society, and the media and using compliant judiciaries and internal security measures to safeguard their incumbency. How and where people get their information will be crucial, particularly as traditional media outlets become obsolete.

²⁷ See Kerry Gershaneck, *Media Warfare: Taiwan's Battle for the Cognitive Domain* (Washington DC: Center for Security Policy, 2021).

²⁸ Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development*.

Elections are unlikely to be abandoned; indeed, illiberal populists often enjoy popularity among the masses and typically ascend to power through democratic processes rather than coercion. However, they also tend to manipulate regulations to perpetuate their tenure, thereby corroding basic freedoms and impeding the ability of informed citizens to hold their leaders to account.

Conclusion

If current illiberal trends persist, it is likely that the Indo-Pacific region cleaved between “free and repressive visions,” as the 2017 US *National Security Strategy* envisaged—but not between liberal democracy and dictatorial autocracies. Instead, pivotal swing states such as India, Indonesia, and Thailand may occupy an intermediate zone, exhibiting some democratic features (like regular elections) alongside repressive elements such as limitations on free speech). To the extent this continues, we are likely to see a bifurcated Indo-Pacific, characterized by democratic governance in the island chain spanning from Japan to New Zealand, an autocratic mainland Asia, and an illiberal Indian Ocean rim.

South Asia, situated uneasily between democracy and autocracy, may blend elements of both systems to ensure electoral dominance by parties representing religious majorities—such as Hindus in India, Muslims in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Indeed, this transition is already underway. Moreover, the traditional elite-dominated, patrimonial politics prevalent in Southeast Asian nations like Indonesia and the Philippines may coexist with emerging parties representing younger voters, akin to developments observed in Thailand and Malaysia.

Lurking in the background to these developments is the stability of the “democratic peace”: the empirical fact that genuine democracies almost never wage war against each other, in contrast to their frequent conflicts with illiberal regimes. Since at least Immanuel Kant’s eighteenth-century invocation of “perpetual peace,” modern political science has confirmed the statistical validity of this pattern: autocracies fight other autocracies, and democracies also engage in conflict with autocracies, but almost never with fellow democracies.²⁹ The Indo-Pacific has witnessed wars between democracies and autocracies—such as the Korean and Vietnam wars—and among autocracies (as seen in China’s 1979 invasion of Vietnam, following Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia), but never between two genuine democracies (the closest instance might be India’s 1987 intervention in the Sri Lankan Civil War).

²⁹ Michael Doyle, *Liberal Peace: Selected Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

While the reasons for this regularity remain disputed, the concept of a democratic peace remains a foundational idea linking democracy and security.³⁰ However, it also presents a twist: can it apply to emerging or declining democracies as well as stable and established ones?³¹ The evidence suggests caution. While long-term democracies are generally less susceptible to internal conflict and highly unlikely to engage in warfare with each other, comparative research indicates that countries undergoing the tumultuous process of *democratization* can become more prone to conflict, not less.³² This does not discredit the democratic peace literature, which provides a statistically compelling rationale for fostering stable democracy, but it does raise questions. According to a recent overview by Dan Reiter, “One of the most indisputable, nontrivial, observed patterns in international relations is that democracies almost never fight each other.”³³ However, it remains uncertain whether this pattern equally applies to both liberal and illiberal democracies. The Indo-Pacific may be the arena in which we find out. 🌐

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³⁰ David L. Rousseau et al., “Assessing the Dyadic Nature of the Democratic Peace, 1918–1988,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (September 1996): 512–33, <https://doi.org/>

³¹ Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³² Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and War,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May–June 1995): 79–97, <https://doi.org/>.

³³ Dan Reiter, “Is Democracy a Cause of Peace?,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 25 January 2017, <https://doi.org/>.

Everything Everywhere All at Once

Wars, Climate Change, Natural Disasters, Coups, and Economic Collapse

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Abstract

Amid escalating active kinetic conflicts and the ever-growing and ever-more-severe environmental impacts of climate disruption, along with related and unrelated public health threats, governments worldwide confront increasingly complex choices in addressing simultaneous and sequential crises. Never in human history have so many states juggled so many disasters within such a brief span, yet our governance mechanisms often prove woefully inadequate for this daunting challenge. Trends strongly indicate that the situation will deteriorate further in the years ahead. Successfully managing and ameliorating our deteriorating physical and geopolitical environments demands a significant shift in mindset among global leaders—a fundamental recognition of humanity’s unity. This necessitates a departure from short-term, self-centered, nationalistic thinking toward a longer-term, more inclusive perspective that embraces the common needs and interests of all individuals on this planet.

The world is grappling with simultaneous, multitiered, and multidimensional security challenges, including two major armed conflicts: one between Russia and Ukraine,¹ and another between Hamas and the state of Israel.² Additionally, regional security tensions persist in the South China Sea,³ the Taiwan Straits,⁴ the India–Pakistan border,⁵ the India–China border,⁶ and several armed conflicts in Africa.⁷

¹ “Russia-Ukraine War,” *New York Times*, n.d., <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

² Ephrat Livni and Gaya Gupta, “What We Know About the War Between Israel and Hamas,” *New York Times*, 20 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

³ Council for Foreign Relations, “Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea,” Global Conflict Tracker, 26 June 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, “Confrontation over Taiwan,” Global Conflict Tracker, 26 July 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

⁵ Abby Pokraka, “History of Conflict in India and Pakistan,” Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 26 November 2019, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/>.

⁶ Sudhi Ranjan Sen, “The Border Dispute That’s Bedeviling China-India Ties,” *Washington Post*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁷ “Africa: Conflicts, Violence Threaten Rights” Human Rights Watch, 12 January 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

While the globe contends with multiple military conflicts, it also faces a surge in major natural disasters. These include destructive fires on the island of Maui in Hawai'i,⁸ unyielding forest fires during the summer of 2023 in Canada,⁹ earthquakes in Morocco¹⁰ and Afghanistan,¹¹ flooding in Libya¹² and Pakistan,¹³ and a glacial lake outbreak flood in Sikkim in India.¹⁴

Compounding these challenges is the ongoing recovery from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 virus,¹⁵ estimated to have caused 7 million deaths worldwide.¹⁶ The virus's effect extends beyond the health sector, straining many countries' capacity to cope with a vast and far-reaching health emergency. Its sweeping economic,¹⁷ social,¹⁸ and political impact¹⁹ ramifications continue to reverberate.

The economic and political fallout from COVID-19 lockdowns²⁰ precipitated the collapse of the Sri Lankan government,²¹ triggered food riots in Pakistan,²²

⁸ "Maui Wildfires," *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>.

⁹ Ian Livingston, "Canada's astonishing and record fire season finally slows down," *Washington Post*, 18 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

¹⁰ Aaron Boxerman, "What We Know About the Earthquake That Devastated Morocco," *New York Times*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

¹¹ "Afghanistan Earthquakes in Herat Province," Health Situation Report No. 9, 17–19 October 2023, *ReliefWeb*, <https://reliefweb.int/>.

¹² "Libya floods: 'Tragedy is not over' warns UNICEF," United Nations, 28 September 2023, <https://news.un.org/>.

¹³ Ijaz Nabi, "Responding to Pakistan floods," *Brookings Institution*, 10 February 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

¹⁴ Jay Mazoomdaar, "Teesta-III dam break: NHPC admits damage, 9 years ago it said no threat," *Indian Express*, 16 October 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/>.

¹⁵ "Post-pandemic world economy still feeling COVID-19's sting," United Nations, 16 May 2023, <https://news.un.org/>.

¹⁶ "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard," World Health Organization, n.d., <https://covid19.who.int/>.

¹⁷ Leora Klapper et al. "Chapter 1. The economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis," in *World Development Report 2022: Finance for an Equitable Recovery* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), <https://www.worldbank.org/>.

¹⁸ Valeria Saladino, Davide Algeri, and Vincenzo Auriemma, "A Commentary on The psychological and social impact of COVID-19: New perspectives of well-being," *Frontiers of Psychology* 11 (2020), <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁹ Andrew Blick and Funmi Olonisakin, "The ongoing political consequences of the pandemic," *WORLD: we got this* (podcast), 7 October 2022, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/>.

²⁰ Yong Suk Lee, Jae Seung Lee, and Saehoon Kim, "Socio-Political-Economic Consequences of COVID-19," Stanford University, n.d., <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/>.

²¹ Chulanee Attanayake, "Years of policy failure and COVID throw Sri Lanka into deep crisis," *East Asia Forum*, 24 April 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/>.

²² Firstpost Staff, "Riots, stampedes across Pakistan as food crisis worsens," *Firstpost*, 11 January 2023, <https://www.firstpost.com/>.

fueled underreported social unrest in China,²³ spurred military coups in Africa,²⁴ and contributed to worldwide food inflation,²⁵ conspiracy theories, antivaccine controversies, and a general distrust of governments.²⁶

Everything is happening all at once everywhere, straining the capacity of governments, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) to address multiple complex disasters that require emergency assistance, long-term economic reconstruction aid, and, most importantly, the political will to devise lasting and innovative solutions.

Argument

This article delves into the ramifications of these simultaneous, multitiered, and multidimensional security challenges, spanning from armed conflicts to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters on political structures. The article questions whether the world's readiness and capacity are sufficient to confront the convergence of multiple crises—namely, various types of disasters driven by diverse factors occurring simultaneously. The article contends that intentional and coordinated planning, on a broader and more inclusive scale than currently practiced, is imperative for humanity to sustain resilience and effectively address these global multidimensional challenges concurrently.

Furthermore, this work asserts that the world is fundamentally ill-prepared to face multiple wars, natural disasters, economic downturns, and political upheavals concurrently due to a lack of simultaneous thinking in leadership, both domestically and internationally. Just as any system is unprepared for multiple challenges concurrently, governments worldwide are unequipped to handle multiple complex emergencies burdening governance systems simultaneously, thus diminishing the efficacy of responders.

Drawing from the concept of simultaneity in physics, which acknowledges that two events occurring in spatially separated locations could coincide temporally,²⁷ the article proposes that policy makers must be prepared to identify and respond

²³ “China: Unprecedented Nationwide Protests Against Abuses: Xi Consolidates Power Amid Covid-19, Economic Challenges,” *Human Rights Watch*, 12 January 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

²⁴ Megan Duzor and Brian Williamson, “Coups in Africa,” *VOA News*, 3 October 2023, <https://projects.voanews.com/>.

²⁵ Jeff Kearns, “Global Food Crisis May Persist, With Prices Still Elevated After Year of War,” *IMF Blog*, 9 March 2023, <https://www.imf.org/>.

²⁶ Ed Pertwee, Clarissa Simas, and Heidi J. Larson, “An epidemic of uncertainty: rumors, conspiracy theories and vaccine hesitancy,” *Nature Medicine* 28 (2022): 456–59, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁷ Max Jammer, *Concepts of Simultaneity: From Antiquity to Einstein and Beyond* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

to multiple and increasingly complex emergencies stemming from distinct causal streams, even if occurring in geographically or temporally distinct timeframes. For instance, a country could face simultaneous natural disasters amid an ongoing civil conflict or economic downturn, potentially precipitating a coup or exacerbating an economic and political crisis.

The article advocates that the initial stride toward addressing multilayered conflicts and security challenges necessitates recognizing that the world is navigating uncharted territory, particularly concerning climate and natural disasters. Merely acknowledging climate-change-induced natural disasters is insufficient; we must grasp that climate disruption is precipitating extreme temperature fluctuations, droughts, floods, and crop failures, thereby jeopardizing the economic prospects of vast populations.²⁸

These climate-induced socioeconomic stressors invariably incite large-scale political protests and market volatility, fostering the migration of people to new regions and escalating the likelihood of identity and economic conflicts.²⁹ Already, we observe mass movements of people such as the Rohingya from Myanmar to neighboring countries in South and Southeast Asia,³⁰ Central and Latin Americans embarking on perilous land routes to North America in sustained waves,³¹ and economic and conflict refugees undertaking arduous journeys across the Mediterranean to Europe.³² According to a report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, each year, “natural disasters force an average of 21.5 million people from their homes around the world.”³³

According to the assessment by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), over the next three decades, as our planet gets hotter, “143 million people are likely to be uprooted because of rising seas, drought, searing tempera-

²⁸ Ameera Adil and Faraz Haider, “The Interdependence of Climate Security and Good Governance: A Case Study from Pakistan,” *Center for Climate and Security*, 25 October 2023, <https://climateandsecurity.org/>.

²⁹ Abraham Lustgarten, “The Great Climate Migration,” *New York Times*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

³⁰ “Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 23 August 2023, <https://www.unrefugees.org/>.

³¹ Peter J. Meyer, “Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy,” *In Focus*, 30 November 2023, <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

³² Corina Pons, “No one can stop them’: African migrants aim for Spain’s Canary Islands,” *Reuters*, 10 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

³³ Julie Watson, “Climate change is already fueling global migration. The world isn’t ready to meet people’s changing needs, experts say,” *PBS News Hour*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/>.

tures, and other climate catastrophes.”³⁴ The report further highlights that “most climate-related migration and displacement observed currently takes place within countries” and the “climate hazards most commonly associated with displacement are tropical cyclones and flooding in most regions, with droughts being an important driver in sub-Saharan Africa, parts of south Asia and South America.”³⁵

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report underscores the “increasing trends of climatic change and variability and extreme events severely impacting the region, exacerbating problems of rampant and persistent poverty, precarious health systems and water and sanitation services, malnutrition and pollution.”³⁶ More importantly, the report findings indicate that poor “governance and lack of participation escalates the vulnerability and risk to climate variability and change in the region.”³⁷

Climate-related migration falls into different categories: (1) temporary and seasonal; (2) indefinite and permanent; (3) internal; (4) international; (5) rural-to-urban or rural-to-rural; (6) displacement; and (7) planned/organized resettlement. Future migration and displacement patterns stemming from climate change will hinge not solely on the physical ramifications of climate change but also on forthcoming policies and planning across various governmental levels.³⁸ Effectively managing the escalating tensions linked to cross-border migration demands an unparalleled international coordination and cooperation effort.³⁹

Geopolitical Tensions and Global Conflict

Geopolitical tensions and conflicts often stem from unresolved territorial and resource disputes, identity clashes, strategic competition, or unchecked political ambitions.⁴⁰ With the abrupt end of the Cold War’s balance-of-power dynamics in the late 1980s, the world appeared to transition into an era of neoliberal global-

³⁴ Guéladio Cissé et al., “Health, Wellbeing and the Changing Structure of Communities,” in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, ed. Hans-Otto Pörtner et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1041–1170, <https://report.ipcc.ch/>.

³⁵ Cissé et al., “Health, Wellbeing and the Changing Structure of Communities,” 1080.

³⁶ Edwin J. Castellanos et al., “Central and South America,” in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, ed. Hans-Otto Pörtner et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1689–1816, <https://report.ipcc.ch/>.

³⁷ Castellanos et al., “Central and South America,” 1709.

³⁸ Brian O’Neill et al., “Key Risks across Sectors and Regions,” in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, ed. Hans-Otto Pörtner et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 2450, <https://report.ipcc.ch/>.

³⁹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “The Future of Migration,” *Global Trends 2040*, April 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/>.

⁴⁰ David Pierson, Anatoly Kurmanaev, and Tiffany May, “With Putin by His Side, Xi Outlines His Vision of a New World Order,” *New York Times*, 18 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

ization, facilitated by economic liberalization and technological advancements.⁴¹ However, countering this trend, in 1998, both India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests, contravening the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.⁴² This action was followed by a significant border conflict in 1999 (Kargil War),⁴³ escalating regional tensions and reigniting fears of nuclear warfare.⁴⁴

The advancement of liberalization faced setbacks across numerous regions due to various conflicts, including the wars in the Balkans,⁴⁵ the 9/11 terror attacks, and subsequent conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria.⁴⁶ Additionally, numerous other conflicts persist globally, such as multisectoral ethnic clashes and widespread civil unrest in Central Africa,⁴⁷ originating from the Democratic Republic of Congo,⁴⁸ as well as the lingering repercussions of the Rwandan genocide⁴⁹ and the enduring civil war in Somalia.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka witnessed a decades-long civil war, culminating in 2009 following a large-scale military operation by the Sri Lankan government.⁵¹ Similarly, Myanmar continues to grapple with an ongoing ethnic conflict since the military junta seized control of the government from civilian rule in 2021, further burdening our collective burdens.⁵²

⁴¹ Jonathan D. Ostry, Prakash Loungani, and Davide Furceri, "Neoliberalism: Oversold?," *Finance & Development* 53, no. (2 June 2016): 38–41, <https://www.imf.org/>.

⁴² Michael Krepon, "Looking Back: The 1998 Indian and Pakistani Nuclear Tests," *Arms Control Today*, June 2008, <https://www.armscontrol.org/>.

⁴³ Bruce Riedel, "How the 1999 Kargil conflict redefined US-India ties," *Brookings Institution*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁴⁴ Alan Robock et al., "How an India-Pakistan nuclear war could start—and have global consequences," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 31 October 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/>.

⁴⁵ United Nations, "The Conflicts," International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, n.d., <https://www.icty.org/>.

⁴⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 25 October 2019, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁴⁷ "Root Causes of Conflicts in Africa Must Be Addressed beyond Traditional Response, Special Adviser Tells Security Council Debate on Silencing Guns" (press release, United Nations, 30 March 2023), <https://press.un.org/>.

⁴⁸ "Armed conflict and violence in Democratic Republic of the Congo," International Committee of Red Cross, n.d., <https://www.icrc.org/>.

⁴⁹ "Rwanda: A Brief History of the Country," United Nations, n.d., <https://www.un.org/>.

⁵⁰ "Somali conflict," International Committee on Red Cross, 2022, <https://www.icrc.org/>.

⁵¹ Nithyani Anandakugan, "The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020," *Harvard International Review*, 31 August 2020, <https://hir.harvard.edu/>.

⁵² Yun Sun, "The civil war in Myanmar: No end in sight," *Brookings Institution*, 13 February 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

The world is witnessing escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula exacerbated by North Korea's aggressive pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities,⁵³ intensifying friction in the Taiwan Straits⁵⁴ and the South China Sea.⁵⁵ Globally, a multitude of micro and macro conflicts, ignited by various root causes such as territorial disputes, resource scarcity, ideological differences, and identity clashes, persist without enduring resolution. The UN IPCC Sixth Assessment report underscores that "climate change has been associated with the onset of conflict, civil unrest or riots in urban settings . . . and changes in the duration and severity of existing violent conflicts."⁵⁶ Moreover, the IPCC panel's findings indicate that "inequality and consequent relative deprivation can lead to conflict and the negative impacts of climate change lower the opportunity cost of involvement in conflict."⁵⁷ Additionally, the IPCC panel warns of potential violent reactions or heightened tensions within families due to evolving gender norms within familial structures.⁵⁸ Overall, the resounding message is clear: conflict has never posed such pervasive destruction—not solely in material terms but also concerning climate change, societal dynamics, economics, and societal cohesion.

According to the Geneva Academy's Armed Conflict Tracker, there are presently 45 armed conflicts occurring in the Middle East and North Africa, 35 in Africa, 21 in Asia, seven in Europe, and six in Latin America, totaling 114 conflicts worldwide.⁵⁹ Many of these confrontations involve nonstate actors and state-sponsored interventions within the regions, often drawing the participation of major external powers. This strains the capacity of states and international organizations to address other pressing policy challenges, including both natural and human-induced nuclear disasters such as Fukushima and Chernobyl.⁶⁰ The Fukushima nuclear catastrophe epitomized a classic cascading disaster triggered by a significant undersea earthquake, resulting in a colossal tsunami off the coast of Japan, which subsequently precipitated a major nuclear accident.⁶¹

⁵³ "North Korea's Military Capabilities," Council on Foreign Relations, 28 June 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

⁵⁴ China Power Team, "Series: The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," *China Power*, 26 April 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

⁵⁵ Kathleen Magramo, "Tensions are flaring once more in the South China Sea. Here's why it matters for the world," *CNN News*, 29 September 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

⁵⁶ Cissé et al., "Health, Wellbeing and the Changing Structure of Communities."

⁵⁷ Cissé et al., "Health, Wellbeing and the Changing Structure of Communities."

⁵⁸ Cissé et al., "Health, Wellbeing and the Changing Structure of Communities."

⁵⁹ "Today's Armed Conflicts," *Geneva Academy*, n.d., <https://geneva-academy.ch/>.

⁶⁰ World Nuclear Association, "Chernobyl Accident 1986," *Safety of Plants*, April 2022, <https://world-nuclear.org/>.

⁶¹ World Nuclear Association, "Fukushima Daiichi Accident," *Safety of Plants*, August 2023, <https://world-nuclear.org/>.

Climate Change and State Response

In a Pew Center Research Survey spanning 19 countries and released in August 2022, 75 percent of participants acknowledge climate change as a major threat, with 19 percent considering it a minor threat, while a mere five percent dismiss it as not a threat.⁶² Clearly, global sentiment underscores climate change as a significant peril to planetary life systems. Nonetheless, the perennial challenge lies in translating public opinion consensus into actionable climate policies at both domestic and international levels—policies that strike a delicate balance between addressing the immediate needs of the global populace and safeguarding the health and stability of the planet.

While addressing climate-related natural disasters has long been within the purview of defense and security forces, the frequency, severity, and human toll of these events are escalating at an alarming rate. These challenges are not merely additive but rather multiplying, as traditional geopolitical adversaries continue to pose persistent threats. Security forces worldwide find themselves not only compelled to contend with more frequent and extensive climate-induced crises but also grappling with escalating day-to-day operations challenges arising from climate-related hazards such as sea level rise-induced inundation, flooding from extreme rainfall events, heatwaves, and crop failures.⁶³

As the demands for responding to these challenges mount, security forces must also assume proactive roles in adapting to the impacts of climate disruption. Failure to do so risks overwhelming these forces in the face of rapidly evolving changes.⁶⁴

Military leaders are increasingly prioritizing immediate concerns and near-term threats, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. However, they may not fully grasp that many of these immediate HADR challenges stem from a combination of factors exacerbated by climate change. Moreover, the long-term outlook suggests that demands for HADR operations are likely to escalate as armed conflicts continue to unfold in various regions worldwide.

Recognizing the threat posed by climate change, some organizations, like the Council of Europe, are striving to integrate it into the European Union's strategic thinking and actions across various domains, including defense research and de-

⁶² Jacob Poushter, Moira Fagan, and Sneha Gubbala, "Three-in-four across 19 countries view global climate change as a major threat to their country" in *Climate Change Remains Top Global Threat Across 19-Country Survey* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 29 August 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/>.

⁶³ Erin Sikorsky, "The World's Militaries Aren't Ready for Climate Change: These days, threats don't just come from other states," *Foreign Policy*, 22 September 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

⁶⁴ Andrew R. Hoehn and Thom Shanker, "Climate Security is National Security," *Rand Blog*, 30 June 2023, <https://www.rand.org/>.

velopment, industry and technology, infrastructure, and the EU Common Security and Defence Policy. According to this road map, interlinked actions are required in multiple areas, such as (1) operational dimension, (2) capability development, and (3) partnerships.⁶⁵

Defense and security forces play a significant role in carbon dioxide emissions, but they are now taking proactive steps to mitigate their carbon footprints by exploring green technologies to reduce emissions. However, this endeavor is particularly challenging as they operate at high levels of activity while also being engaged in conflict situations, such as the 114 conflicts mentioned previously.⁶⁶ These intricate challenges are not confined to isolated areas; rather, security forces worldwide are grappling with them, straining resources and leaving fewer to be shared with allies, partners, and those in need or crisis. Moreover, this scenario unfolds in an increasingly daunting environment where once-in-a-century-type natural disasters occurring simultaneously at multiple geographic locations are becoming more commonplace.

Climate Change and Military Readiness

There is widespread acknowledgment that climate change poses a national security threat. Military leaders recognize that climate change acts as a force multiplier and a significant disruptor. However, only a handful of countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have begun formulating plans to adapt to climate conditions as integral components of their military readiness and preparedness plans.⁶⁷ Other major military powers, including China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, have yet to incorporate climate preparedness—such as adaptation, mitigation, and resilience—into their military planning.⁶⁸

While China's supreme leader, Xi Jinping, has announced ambitious goals to reduce carbon emissions starting in 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has not publicly demonstrated a sense of urgency regarding climate change as part of its security strategy.⁶⁹ Although there

⁶⁵ "The EU's Climate Change and Defence Roadmap," European Union, March 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/>.

⁶⁶ Harry Bowcott et al., "Decarbonizing Defense: Imperative and Opportunity," *McKinsey & Company*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/>.

⁶⁷ *Department of Defense Climate Adaptation Plan* (Washington, DC: DOD, 1 September 2021), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁶⁸ Michael Brzoska, "Climate change and the military in China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 68, no. 2 (2012): 43–5, <https://thebulletin.org/>.

⁶⁹ Justin Leopold-Cohen, "Preparing for Climate Change in the World's Top Militaries," *Small Wars Journal*, 11 January 2021, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/>.

is recognition that climate change falls within the realm of nontraditional security, and the PLA is engaged in various programs to promote environmental sustainability, such as massive reforestation efforts, there is no explicit mention of climate change in its Chinese Defense White Paper published in 2019.⁷⁰ There is a prevailing belief that China favors technological solutions over other measures to address climate change.⁷¹

Similarly, Russia, a significant oil producer, appears indifferent to climate concerns, evident in its sustained and energy-intensive war against Ukraine.⁷² Despite being a signatory to all UN climate treaties, including the Paris Agreement's commitment to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 or soon after,⁷³ Russia's efforts to tackle climate change have been rated as "highly insufficient" by the Climate Action Tracker. The country's existing policies indicate no real commitment to curb emissions.⁷⁴ In anticipation of the UN's COP28 climate summit, Russia voiced opposition to the "phasing out" of fossil fuels, and its recently revised climate doctrine omits any reference to fossil fuels and their climate impact.⁷⁵

The environmental repercussions of Russia's military offensive against Ukraine have been profound. The conflict has resulted in numerous instances of air, water, land, and soil pollution, along with ecosystem damage.⁷⁶ Ukrainian authorities estimate that Russia's military activities adversely affected 900 protected natural areas in Ukraine within the initial months of the war alone—the subsequent damage over the past two years of conflict remain to be measured.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the conflict has detrimentally impacted Ukraine's diverse biodiversity, with forest fires, deforestation, explosions, fortification construction, and soil and water contamination all jeopardizing wildlife and habitats.

⁷⁰ Thomas Corbett and Peter W. Singer, "As Climate Change Threatens China, PLA Is Missing in Action," *Defense One*, 18 January 2022, <https://www.defenseone.com/>.

⁷¹ Chenchao Lian and Jinhong Li, "Legitimacy-seeking: China's Statements and Actions on Combating Climate Change," *Third World Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2024): 171–88, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷² Evgeny Pudovkin, "How the War Changed Russia's Climate Agenda," *BBC Monitoring*, 10 December 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67637803>.

⁷³ Gregory Safonov, "Back to the Future?: Russia's Climate Policy Evolution," *CSIS*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁷⁴ "Russian Federation," *Climate Action Tracker*, 9 November 2022, <https://climateactiontracker.org/>.

⁷⁵ Evgeny Pudovkin, "How the war changes Russia's climate agenda," *BBC News*, 10 December 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

⁷⁶ European Parliament, "Russia's war on Ukraine: High environmental toll," *At a Glance*, July 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/>.

⁷⁷ OECD, "Environmental impacts of the war in Ukraine and prospects for a green reconstruction," Policy Responses, 1 July 2022, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/>.

Thus, despite Russia's pledges to address climate change, its actions, particularly its energy-intensive military operations in Ukraine, reveal a contrasting reality. The environmental fallout from this campaign, coupled with Russia's reliance on fossil fuels for its economy, underscores the complexity and urgency of addressing climate change. It is evident that a more concerted effort is imperative from Russia, as well as all nations, to tackle this pressing global issue.

The US Department of Defense (DOD) adaptability plan currently outlines initiatives to train military personnel in climate adaptation techniques and enhance supply-chain resilience through collaboration and cooperation with allies and partners.⁷⁸ The White House Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, issued on 27 January 2021, established climate considerations as "an essential element of United States foreign policy and national security." The Executive Branch of the United States has declared that it would be its policy to "work with other countries and partners, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to put the world on a sustainable climate pathway."⁷⁹

US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks asserts that climate change is unequivocally a "national security issue" acknowledged by the national security community.⁸⁰ For the United States, climate preparedness encompasses a spectrum of measures, including fortifying shelters and bases, addressing rising sea levels in vulnerable regions, and reducing reliance on fossil fuels while transitioning to renewable energy sources. There is also widespread recognition that integrating climate considerations into the operational environment and decision-making process could offer strategic advantages.⁸¹

Difficulties of Reducing the Global Carbon Footprint

Environmental concerns and climate change pose threats not only to us but also to our allies and adversaries, constraining access to natural resources, exacerbating internal and international tensions, and increasingly precipitating conflicts. Paradoxically, these challenges unfold against a backdrop of changing conditions on a planetary scale, heightening the imperative for intensely coop-

⁷⁸ *Department of Defense Climate Adaptation Plan.*

⁷⁹ "Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad" (executive order, White House, 27 January 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁸⁰ Jim Garamone, "Hicks Defines Need to Focus DOD on Climate Change Threats," *Defense One*, 30 August 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

⁸¹ Josh Sawislak et al., "Climate-Forward Defense," *Deloitte Insights*, 15 September 2022, <https://www2.deloitte.com/>.

erative, collaborative, and innovative approaches in our dealings with both allies and adversaries.

Global Carbon Emissions from Fossil Fuels, 1900–2014

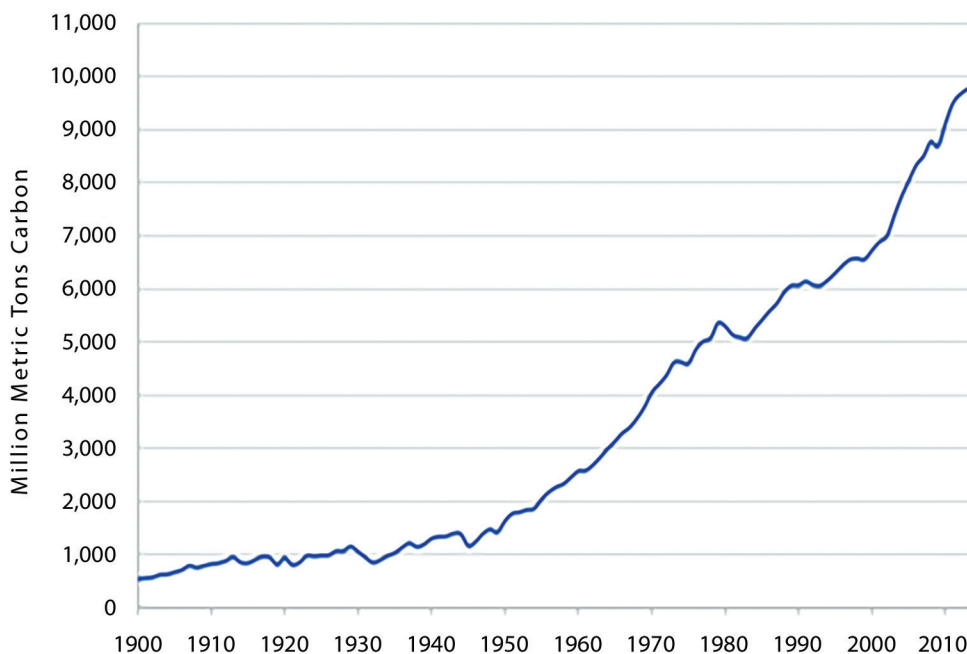


Figure 1. Global carbon emissions. (Source: US Environmental Protection Agency, “Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions Data,” 7 February 2024, <https://www.epa.gov/>.)

Global carbon emissions have surged from approximately 500 million metric tons at the turn of the last century to over 10,000 metric tons in the previous decade. This escalation in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions and other greenhouse gases—such as methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), hydrofluorocarbons (HFC), perfluorocarbons (PFC), sulfur hexafluoride (SF₆), and nitrogen trifluoride (NF₃), as identified by the Kyoto Protocol of 1997—are acknowledged as the primary contributors to the rise in global temperatures and the onset of climate-related events.⁸²

⁸² National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory, United Kingdom, “Overview of the Greenhouse Gas Emissions,” 14 October 2022, <https://naei.beis.gov.uk/>.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, carbon emissions from fossil fuels have seen a significant increase since 1900, with emissions from fossil fuel combustion and industrial processes accounting for more than three-fourths of the total greenhouse gas emissions rise from 1970 to 2011. In addition to fossil fuel consumption, agricultural activities, deforestation, and other land-use practices stand as the second-largest contributors to the escalation in carbon emissions (fig. 1).⁸³ It is evident that achieving a substantial reduction in climate-altering emissions on a global scale necessitates coordinated efforts among key contributors such as the United States, the People’s Republic of China, India, Russia, and the European Union, which collectively account for the majority of these greenhouse gas emissions (fig. 1).⁸⁴ While Asia (excluding China) also contributes to CO₂ emissions, these are distributed among numerous nations that lack the economic cohesion seen in the European Union, making policy coordination nearly unattainable. Similarly, individual countries in Asia outside the People’s Republic of China (PRC) do not come close to matching the emission levels of the five aforementioned entities—China, United States, the European Union, India, and Russia.

Global Percentage Share of Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHG) 2022

Chart based on data from European Commission for Global Atmospheric Research



Figure 2. 2022 snapshot of global share of greenhouse gas emissions. (Source: European Commission, “EDGAR—Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research, 2023 Report,” <https://edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>.)

⁸³ US Environmental Protection Agency, “Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions Data,” 7 February 2024, <https://www.epa.gov/>.

⁸⁴ Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, “CO₂ emissions,” *Our World in Emissions*, January 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/>.

Renewable energy's prominence is growing swiftly in India relative to other major economies, yet India remains heavily dependent on coal, which satisfies nearly 80 percent of its overall energy requirements.⁸⁵ As the Indian economy continues its trajectory of growth and expansion, the demand for energy will likewise surge, leading to a heightened reliance on fossil fuels, particularly coal and oil.

Meanwhile, China, renowned as one of the largest consumers of coal, emits nearly a third of all energy-related greenhouse gases—a figure surpassing the combined emissions of the United States, Europe, and Japan (fig. 2).⁸⁶ In fact, China's coal consumption exceeds that of the rest of the world combined, with a rapid expansion in the construction of coal-fired power plants. Furthermore, China claims two-thirds of the global coal-fired capacity, with an additional 106 gigawatts of new coal power capacity added in 2022 alone.⁸⁷ By comparison, the operating capacities of coal-fired plants in India and the United States are approximately 236,000 and 205,000 megawatts, respectively.⁸⁸

The United States and the People's Republic of China appear entrenched in a great-power rivalry, marked by escalating tensions and dwindling cooperative efforts. Both India and the PRC have substantial energy needs, much of which is met by coal-powered plants necessary to sustain economic growth and societal stability. Currently, there are no politically viable mechanisms in place to reduce the per capita energy consumption of North American and European populations—ranging from 50 kwh to 100 kwh and 20 kwh to 50 kwh, respectively—to levels that are globally sustainable.⁸⁹ Moreover, the top-five coal-consuming countries also rank among the world's top-five oil consumers, further contributing to the escalating greenhouse gas emissions. Despite advancements, non-fossil fuel energy alternatives have yet to attain the scale required to match the current pace of economic activity.

⁸⁵ Tara Subramaniam, "The world needs India to avert climate catastrophe. Can Modi deliver?" *CNN News*, 8 November 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

⁸⁶ Keith Bradsher, "Why Heat Waves Are Deepening China's Addiction to Coal," *New York Times*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

⁸⁷ Sam Meredith, "China's energy transition sees 'staggering' progress on renewables — and a coal power boom," *CNBC News*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/>.

⁸⁸ "Global Coal Plant Tracker," Global Energy Monitor, n.d., <https://globalenergymonitor.org/>.

⁸⁹ "Energy Use Per Person, 2022," *Our World in Data*, 12 December 2023, <https://ourworldindata.org/>.

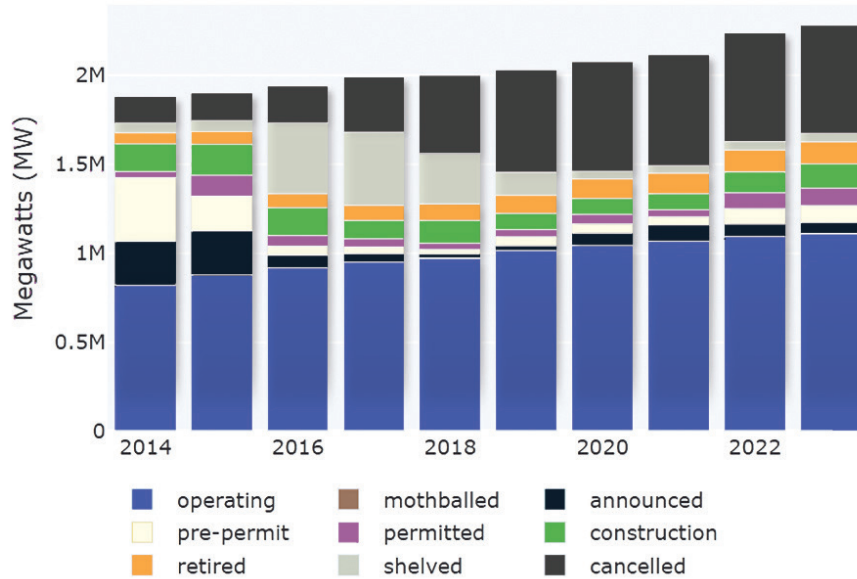


Figure 3. China coal-fired plants production and operational capacity. (Chart based on data from Flora Champenois et al., *China’s new coal power spree continues as more provinces jump on the bandwagon* (Helsinki: Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, August 2023), <https://energyandcleanair.org/>.)

Future of Climate Change and Global Conflict

Like pandemics, climate change triggers conflict through intricate and indirect channels, disproportionately impacting already vulnerable populations and fragile regions grappling with governance deficiencies and corruption.⁹⁰ During extreme climate events, women face heightened risks of domestic violence, harassment, and even trafficking. Economic pressures often compel women to seek employment outside their homes, leading to cultural tensions and domestic abuse, while men may migrate in search of work, further straining familial dynamics.⁹¹

One prominent example illustrating a direct link between climate change and conflict is the case of Syria.⁹² Scholars have theorized that droughts and severe water shortages in Syria from 2006 to 2010 precipitated a famine, prompting mass internal migrations, particularly to urban centers. These migrations

⁹⁰ United Nations, “Climate and Conflict,” *Climate Change*, 12 July 2022, <https://unfccc.int/>.

⁹¹ Cissé et al., “Health, Wellbeing and the Changing Structure of Communities,” 1088.

⁹² “Syrian Civil War: The Role of Climate Change,” *Climate Diplomacy*, n.d., <https://climate-diplomacy.org/>.

fostered tensions among various urban communities, culminating in widespread protests in 2011 that ignited a massive civil war engulfing the entire region and beyond.⁹³

The root cause of the Syrian drought, potentially attributed to climate change, prompted nearly a million people to flee the northeast region of Syria.⁹⁴ Three climate-related factors—severe water shortages, food insecurity, and population stressors—converged to exacerbate the political and economic crisis in Syria.⁹⁵ Some estimates suggest that Syria experienced its most severe drought in 900 years, resulting in the destruction of crops and livestock, compelling rural residents to migrate to urban areas alongside refugees from Iraq.⁹⁶ Water scarcity intensified, and food prices soared, amplifying suffering and social upheaval. The distress caused by the drought, crop failures, and water scarcity served as primary catalysts for unrest. Internal migrants relocated to Syrian cities, sparking tensions with existing urban populations and other refugees from the region, ultimately leading to peaceful antigovernment protests aimed at addressing economic grievances. However, the government's harsh response to the protests exacerbated the situation, attracting radical nonstate actors and external powers who exacerbated violence, resulting in an unmanageable disaster of monumental proportions.

While climate change or ecological factors may not have been the sole cause, they acted as significant threat multipliers in Syria. Combined with extreme inequality, poor governance, corruption, and political polarization, they set the stage for catastrophic violence. Although this scenario may not replicate itself in every context, in the Syrian case, a combination of risk factors compounded by climate change is more likely to fuel volatile situations in other climate-vulnerable regions. Crop failures stemming from droughts and land-use dynamics spurred outward migration and eventual hostilities in Syria.⁹⁷

Similar climate-exacerbated conflicts are unfolding in other regions, such as the central Iranian province of Khuzestan, characterized by resource richness but plagued by severe water scarcity, environmental degradation, economic deprivation, and sociopolitical discontent. Conflicts also manifest in the Rift Valley of Kenya,

⁹³ Colin P. Kelley et al., "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 11 (2015): 3241–46, <https://doi.org/>.

⁹⁴ Nick Schifrin, "Assad's Idlib offensive drives nearly 1 million from their homes—and into the cold," *PBS NewsHour*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/>.

⁹⁵ "Syrian Civil War: The Role of Climate Change."

⁹⁶ Vikram Mansharamani, "A major contributor to the Syrian conflict? Climate change," *PBS Newshour*, 17 March 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/>.

⁹⁷ Lina Eklund et al., "Societal drought vulnerability and the Syrian climate-conflict nexus are better explained by agriculture than meteorology," *Communications, Earth & Environment* 3 (2022): 85, <https://doi.org/>.

where pastoralists clash with farm owners,⁹⁸ and in the Horn of Africa, where climate change exacerbates water scarcity, food shortages, and competition over limited resources.⁹⁹ The National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change (NIECC), based on forecast modeling, presents three key findings establishing linkages between climate change and conflict (fig. 4).¹⁰⁰

Finding No. 1: “Geopolitical tensions are likely to grow as countries increasingly argue about how to accelerate the reductions in net greenhouse gas emissions that will be needed to meet the Paris Agreement goals. Debate will center on who bears more responsibility to act and to pay—and how quickly—and countries will compete to control resources and dominate new technologies needed for the clean energy transition. Most countries will face difficult economic choices and probably will count on technological breakthroughs to rapidly reduce their net emissions later.”¹⁰¹

Finding No. 2: “The increasing physical effects of climate change are likely to exacerbate cross-border geopolitical flashpoints as states take steps to secure their interests. The reduction in sea ice is already amplifying strategic competition in the Arctic over access to its natural resources. Elsewhere, as temperatures rise and more extreme effects manifest, there is a growing risk of conflict over water and migration, particularly after 2030, and an increasing chance that countries will unilaterally test and deploy large-scale solar geoengineering—creating a new area of disputes.”¹⁰²

Finding No. 3: “Scientific forecasts indicate that intensifying physical effects of climate change out to 2040 and beyond will be most acutely felt in developing countries, which we assess are also the least able to adapt to such changes. These physical effects will increase the potential for instability and possibly internal conflict in these countries, in some cases creating additional demands on US diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, and military resources.”¹⁰³

⁹⁸ International Crisis Group, “Absorbing Climate Shocks and Easing Conflict in Kenya’s Rift Valley,” *Crisis Group Africa Briefing 189*, 20 April 2023, <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/>.

⁹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Climate and Conflict in the Horn of Africa,” *YouTube*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

¹⁰⁰ Office of Director of National Intelligence, “The National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change (NIECC),” 21 October 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/>.

¹⁰¹ “Peters Introduces Bill to Codify National Intelligence Climate Report” (press release, US Representative Scott Peters, California District 50, 26 April 2023), <https://scottpeters.house.gov/>.

¹⁰² “Peters Introduces Bill to Codify National Intelligence Climate Report.”

¹⁰³ “Peters Introduces Bill to Codify National Intelligence Climate Report.”

The key findings of the NIECC report are as follows:

1. Geopolitical tensions are likely to intensify due to disputes over greenhouse gas emissions, driven by issues of burden sharing and the zero-sum policies of various countries.
2. The physical impacts of climate change will escalate strategic competition, a trend already evident in current global dynamics.
3. Developing countries will bear the brunt of climate change's effects, as they are the least equipped to handle its adverse consequences.

Over the past century, the world has “witnessed a tenfold increase in the number of natural disasters since the 1960s.” Correspondingly, the “resulting cost of handling such disasters has gone up from 50 billion USD in 1950s to 200 billion USD per year during the last decade” (fig. 3).¹⁰⁴

According to the 2022 Ecological Threat Report, “27 hotspot countries face catastrophic ecological threats, while also having the lowest levels of societal resilience.” These 27 countries are home to 768 million people. The main conclusions drawn from the this report, the IPCC findings, and the NIECC estimates collectively underscore that without “concerted international action, current levels of ecological degradation will substantially worsen, thereby intensifying a range of social challenges, including malnutrition, forced migration and illness.” Overall, these reports and all these findings unequivocally suggest that climate-related “conflicts will escalate and multiply as a result, creating further global insecurity.”¹⁰⁵

Another study, the Global Peace Report, reveals that countries scoring high on the positive peace index (signifying greater peace and robust governance systems) have demonstrated greater responsiveness and successful adaptation to ecological and public health threats compared to nations plagued by chronic violence and weak governance.¹⁰⁶

There is mounting evidence that a dangerous nexus of climate change, health risks, and conflict is intricately linked through multiple causal pathways, amplifying the frequency of global disasters, armed conflicts, and mass migrations. Mitigating the consumption and production of fossil fuels must be integral to any viable solution.

¹⁰⁴ “Increase in Natural Disasters on a Global Scale by Ten Times,” *Vision of Humanity*, n.d., <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/>.

¹⁰⁵ *Ecological Threat Report 2022: Analysing Ecological Threats, Resilience & Peace* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, October 2022), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/>.

¹⁰⁶ *Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, June 2020), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/>.

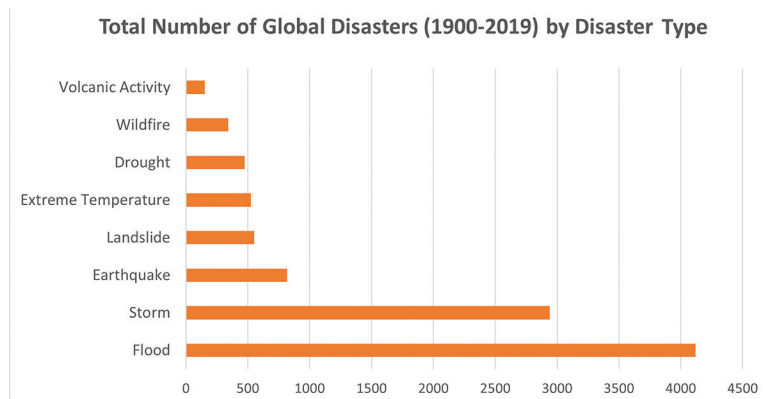


Figure 4. Total number of global disasters (1900–2019) by disaster type. (Data source for the chart derived from Ecological Threat Report 2022: Analysing Ecological Threats, Resilience & Peace (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, October 2022), [https://www.visionofhumanity.org/.](https://www.visionofhumanity.org/))

Renowned former NASA scientist, Jim Hansen, who testified before the US Congress about climate change nearly 35 years ago, has issued stark warnings. He asserts that global warming is accelerating at an alarming rate, surpassing previous estimations of urgency.¹⁰⁷ Recently, a study led by Hansen and fellow researchers warned that the planet is on track to surpass 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming by the 2020s, as indicated by the impending COP 28 Global Climate Summit. This trajectory suggests that by 2050, global warming could exceed 2.0 degrees Celsius.¹⁰⁸ The study indicates that such rapid warming will intensify “hydrologic (weather) extremes” and underscores the planet’s heightened sensitivity to greenhouse gases, surpassing previous estimates.¹⁰⁹

Using a metric called “climate sensitivity,” Hansen and his colleagues have discovered that the planet’s response to greenhouse gases could be more rapid than previously thought.¹¹⁰ This heightened sensitivity implies a potentially accelerated rate of global warming beyond earlier projections.

Hansen and his colleagues emphasize that while limiting warming to under 2.0 degrees Celsius remains feasible, the window to achieve the more stringent target

¹⁰⁷ Philip Shabecoff, “Global Warming Has Begun, Expert Tells Senate,” *New York Times*, 24 June 1988, [https://www.nytimes.com/.](https://www.nytimes.com/)

¹⁰⁸ Delger Erdenesanaa, “35 Years After Addressing Congress, James Hansen Has More Climate Warnings,” *New York Times*, 2 November 2023, [https://www.nytimes.com/.](https://www.nytimes.com/)

¹⁰⁹ James E. Hansen et al., “Global warming in the pipeline,” *Oxford Open Climate Change* 3, no. 1 (2023), kgad008, [https://doi.org/.](https://doi.org/)

¹¹⁰ Chelsea Harvey, “Earth Reacts to Greenhouse Gases More Strongly Than We Thought,” *Scientific American*, 3 November 2023, [https://www.scientificamerican.com/.](https://www.scientificamerican.com/)

of 1.5 degrees Celsius is rapidly closing.¹¹¹ To prevent surpassing the 2.0 degrees Celsius threshold, concerted efforts are needed to curtail fossil fuel production and consumption, surpassing current standards.¹¹²

Should nations fail to collaborate effectively in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating temperature rise, the consequences could manifest in simultaneous and intensified environmental disasters, including exacerbated heatwaves, wildfires, biodiversity loss, severe storms, flooding, habitat destruction, and profound impacts on food security and societal well-being.

The Synthesis Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report (Summary for Policymakers) paints a stark picture of our future, emphasizing the increasingly unstable and perilous path ahead. The report clearly states that there "is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all. . . . The choices and actions implemented in this decade will have impacts now and for thousands of years" (fig. 5).¹¹³

In alignment with this grim assessment, the World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) 2023 report highlights a concerning trend of rapid acceleration in global climate change from 2011 to 2020—a period characterized by what the WMO terms a "decadal acceleration." The report underscores that the previous decade was the "warmest decade on record by a clear margin for both land and ocean," and each of the previous decades since the 1990s has been "warmer than all previous decades."¹¹⁴ Moreover,

Marine heatwaves are becoming more frequent and intense. In any given year between 2011 and 2020, approximately 60% of the surface of the ocean experienced a heatwave. Global mean sea level rise is accelerating, largely because of ocean warming and the loss of land ice mass. From 2011 to 2020, sea level rose at an annual rate of 4.5mm/yr. Glaciers that were measured around the world thinned by approximately 1m per year on average between 2011 and 2020. Greenland and Antarctica lost 38% more ice

¹¹¹ Hansen, et. al., "Global warming in the pipeline."

¹¹² Kasha Patel and Shannon Osaka, "Famed climate scientist has a new, dire prediction," *Washington Post*, 2 November 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

¹¹³ Hoesung Lee and José Romero, eds., *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report* (Geneva: IPCC, 2023), 24–25, <https://www.ipcc.ch/>.

¹¹⁴ Blair Trewin et al., *The Global Climate 2011–2020: A decade of accelerating climate change*, 2023 WMO-No. 1338 (Geneva: World Meteorological Organization, 2023), <https://library.wmo.int/>.

between 2011 and 2020 than during the 2001-2010 period. This is consistent with an acceleration of ice sheet mass loss.¹¹⁵

RISK TYPE	RISK IMPACTS	2025	2030	2040
Geopolitical Risks Over Climate Responses	Perceptions of Insufficient Contributions to Reduce Emissions	Low	Medium	High
	CO ₂ Removal Not a Scale for Countries' Net-Zero Pledges	None	Low	Medium
	Developing country demands for Financing and Tech Assistance	Medium	High	Very High
	Petro States Resist Transition from Clean Energy	Low	High	Very High
	Competition With China over Critical Minerals and Energy Tech	Medium	High	Very High
	Contention over the Use of Econ Tools to Reduce Climate Change	Low	Medium	High
Climate-Exacerbated Geopolitical Flashpoints	Miscalculation over Strategic Competition in the Arctic	None	Low	High
	Cross-Border Water Conflicts	Low	High	Very High
	Cross-Border Migration Due to Climate Impact	High	High	Very High
	Ungoverned and Unilateral Geoengineering	None	Low	High
Climate Effects Impacting Country-Level Instability	Strain on Energy and Food Systems	Low	High	Very High
	Negative Health Consequences	Low	High	Very High
	Internal Insecurity and Conflict	Medium	High	Very High
	Greater Demand for Aid and HADR	High	High	Very High
	Strain on Military Readiness	Low	Medium	High

None
 Low
 Medium
 High
 Very High

Figure 5. Geopolitical risk estimates of climate change on conflict. (Modified from Office of Director of National Intelligence, "The National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change (NIECC)," 21 October 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/>.)

The consensus among scientific reports is clear: without effective collective political action, the world is barreling toward a climate collapse, setting off a chain of catastrophic events. The recent COP 28 Climate Summit in Dubai (30 November 2023 to 13 December 2023) teeters on the "cusp of failure," primarily due to the inability of participating nations to agree on crucial language regarding the

¹¹⁵ Trewin et al., *The Global Climate 2011-2020*.

phase-out of fossil fuels.¹¹⁶ While this summit was the first to officially acknowledge that fossil fuels are the root cause of climate change,¹¹⁷ the Oil Producing and Exporting Countries (OPEC) remained opposed to any language exclusively targeting fossil fuels.¹¹⁸ This deadlock highlights the significant hurdles in addressing the root causes of climate change and underscores the lack of tangible progress in mitigating climate-related conflicts.

Another alarming aspect of twenty-first-century climate change is its intricate link to public health and infectious diseases. Diseases like malaria and dengue fever exhibit strong correlations with broader environmental factors. Furthermore, the expanding human footprint and increased interaction with wildlife heighten the risk of zoonotic diseases. As such, the convergence of climate change and public health issues is becoming increasingly apparent and demands urgent attention.¹¹⁹

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires tackling the interconnectedness of various factors, including the food-energy-water-health nexus and the complex relationship between air quality and climate risks.¹²⁰ However, achieving meaningful reforms is hindered by a lack of political will and financial constraints. Overcoming these barriers is essential to enhancing adaptive capacity and implementing the necessary measures to safeguard both the environment and public health for future generations.

Benjamin Franklin's words during the signing of the US Declaration of Independence in 1776 resonate profoundly in this context: "We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."¹²¹ The challenges posed by our altered climate and other pollutants threaten to divide us, endangering each individual separately. Overcoming these challenges requires significant international cooperation and the implementation of advanced technological solutions, including green energy, carbon sequestration, and geoengineering techniques. Only through global action can we effectively mitigate the negative impacts of these pressing issues.

¹¹⁶ Angela Dewan and Laura Paddison, "'Verge of complete failure': Climate summit draft drops the mention of fossil fuel phase-out, angering advocates," *CNN*, 11 December 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

¹¹⁷ Aruna Chandrasekhar et al., "COP28: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Dubai," *CarbonBrief*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/>.

¹¹⁸ Yousef Saba and Maha El Dahan, "OPEC head to OPEC+: reject COP28 language on fossil fuel phase-out," *Reuters*, 8 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹¹⁹ Walter Leal Filho et al., "Climate Change and Zoonoses: A Review of Concepts, Definitions, and Bibliometrics," *International Journal Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 2 (2022): 893, <https://doi.org/>.

¹²⁰ David Dodman et al., "Cities, Settlements and Key Infrastructure," in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, ed. Hans-Otto Pörtner et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 907–1040, <https://report.ipcc.ch/>.

¹²¹ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Viking, 1945), 418–19.

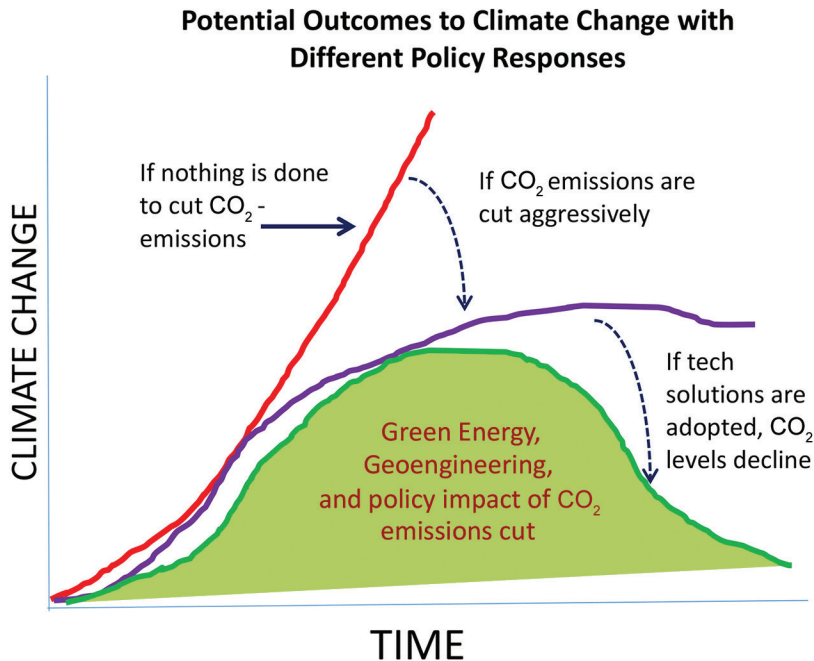


Figure 6. Impact of climate change with accompanying policy changes. (Chart modified and adopted from "What Is Solar Geoengineering? How does it work, what are the risks, and why should we study it?" Union of Concerned Scientists, 4 December 2020, <https://www.ucsusa.org/>.)

A Way Ahead

The expanding scope and intensity of global security threats demand a fresh approach from governments and security sectors worldwide. Concepts such as global health diplomacy demonstrate that it is possible to address multiple challenges using the same resources and are based on principles of international cooperation rather than competition.¹²² As many of these crises, driven by climate disruption and public health concerns, transcend national borders, relying solely on nationalist perspectives to address them is no longer tenable. A swift and sustained response is imperative to tackle both the immediate and long-term ramifications of these threats. Given the concurrent nature of these ecological challenges,

¹²² Sebastian Kevany, "Global health diplomacy, 'smart power', and the new world order," *Global Public Health* 9, no. 7 (2014): 787–807, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>.

governments and security sectors must reassess their roles and relationships with both allies and adversaries.

At the recently concluded COP 28 Summit in Dubai, participating countries agreed to “transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly and equitable manner,” with the objective of achieving global net-zero emissions by 2050, in alignment with scientific evidence.¹²³ However, the summit’s official document did not explicitly call for “phasing out fossil fuels.”¹²⁴

In the Global Stocktake document unveiled at COP 28, the state parties to the United Nations Conference on Climate Change made minimal references to fossil fuels. While one mention addressed the need to phase them out without specifying a timeline, another highlighted the necessity of phasing out “inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that do not address energy poverty or just transitions, as soon as possible.”¹²⁵

It is essential to clarify that the COP 28 outcome document does not advocate for the immediate phasing out of fossil fuels but rather emphasizes transitioning away from them at some indeterminate point in the future.¹²⁶ While the inclusion of language calling for such a transition marks a significant step forward compared to previous climate summits, the ambiguity surrounding the timeframe undermines its potential impact on achieving climate objectives.¹²⁷

The small island states and low-lying coastal nations expressed disappointment with the outcome document of the COP 28 summit.¹²⁸ For these highly vulnerable countries facing the imminent threat of rising sea levels, the summit’s failure to prioritize the phased-out of fossil fuels fell short of addressing the urgency of the climate crisis. They argue that the gravity of their concerns and the escalating impact of climate change have not been fully understood; had it been recognized, the summit participants would have advocated for a rapid transition away from fossil fuels.

However, some observers contend that the mere inclusion of language regarding transitioning from fossil fuels in the COP 28 summit’s outcomes represents a

¹²³ United Nations, “Outcome of the First Global Stocktake. Draft Decision -/CMA.5,” Proposal by the President, FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/L.17, 13 December 2023, <https://unfccc.int/>.

¹²⁴ Pilita Clark in Dubai and Jamie Smyth, “COP28: the new climate commitments that really count,” *Financial Times*, 15 December 2023, <https://www.ft.com/>.

¹²⁵ United Nations, “Outcome of the First Global Stocktake.”

¹²⁶ United Nations, “Outcome of the First Global Stocktake.”

¹²⁷ Bob Berwyn, “COP28 Does Not Deliver Clear Path to Fossil Fuel Phase Out,” *Inside Climate News*, 13 December 2023, <https://insideclimatenews.org/>.

¹²⁸ Natasha Turak, “Pacific Islands lash out at COP28 presidency: ‘We weren’t in the room’ when deal was announced,” *CNBC*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/>.

significant achievement. At the summit, there appeared to be a greater emphasis on exploring technological solutions to climate change, such as substantial investments in renewable energy like solar and wind power, geoengineering techniques, and measures for climate mitigation and adaptation, rather than tackling the root cause by completely phasing out fossil fuels.

The primary challenge remains in devising a globally equitable agreement applicable to all nations while transitioning to renewable energy without disrupting current fossil fuel consumption patterns. There needs to be a widespread recognition that we are all interconnected, sharing the same planet and facing shared threats. Collaboration among nations is imperative, as no single entity can address these challenges alone. This necessitates governmental leaders setting aside doctrinal and ideological disparities and acknowledging the common existential threat posed by climate change. Ultimately, the repercussions of conflict, in all its manifestations, now affect both the victors and the vanquished alike. 🌍

Dr. Ethan Allen

Dr. Allen is a leading educator and advocate for water security and STEM education. Currently a professor with the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, he has a rich background, overseeing STEM programs in Pacific islands, leading National Science Foundation initiatives, and co-authoring the handbook *Water for Life*. With a biology degree and a doctorate in neuroscience, Dr. Allen's impactful career spans diverse roles, from directing science education programs to hosting the "Likable Science" TV show, promoting science accessibility. His commitment to community resilience is evident in his contributions to water science education and collaborative impact projects.

Dr. Sebastian Kevany

Dr. Kevany is a specialist in health security, health diplomacy, health as foreign policy, international relations, and global public health. Within these realms, he has gained extensive experience in the fields of monitoring and evaluation, cost-effectiveness analysis, diplomacy, national and international security, conflict resolution, and the use of global health engagement as a means of preventing or resolving international conflict.

Dr. Srinivasan

Dr. Srinivasan's focus is on Indo-Pacific security with a particular emphasis on geopolitics, economics, South Asia, maritime security in the Indian Ocean region, and emerging technology. He has published widely in academic and policy journals, and his commentary has appeared in various news outlets.

Strategic Alliances and Educational Empowerment

US Security Cooperation through the Regional Defense Fellowship and International Military Education and Training Programs

DR. HYUNSOO HUR

Abstract

Every year, the US Department of Defense (DOD) invests billions to engage in numerous cooperative activities with partner nation security forces and officials, solidifying its partnerships. The DOD's Regional Defense Fellowship Program (RDFP) and the Department of State's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program offer education and training to foreign military and civilian personnel, fostering international military relationships, exchanging military systems information, promoting military professionalism, and instilling human rights and democratic values. This qualitative evaluation reports findings from interviews with security cooperation officers and civilian employees from Colombia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Mexico, and Thailand, directly involved in in-country security cooperation tasks. Data show RDFP and IMET activities span technical training, English language instruction, seminars, workshops, and professional military education, including undergraduate and graduate education. Returns on Investment can be short- or long-term, with short-term outcomes being tangible and long-term outcomes intangible, potentially taking decades to manifest. Recommendations for program enhancement are provided.

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* highlighted the importance of strengthening ties with partner nations.¹ Creating new partnerships and building the capacity of existing partnerships are the core priorities of security cooperation that could lead to “developing allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and coalition operations; improving information exchange; and providing U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access and en route infrastructure.”² The United States has been collaborating with or working through others to enable allied and partner capabilities, build capacity,

¹ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/>.

² Gregory J. Dyekman, *Security Cooperation: A Key Challenge of the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, November 2007), 2, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/>.

and develop mechanisms to share challenging risks and responsibilities.³ Long-term efforts have been made to build and maintain a foundational base of security partners through exercises, military education, and exchanges.

Every year, the US Department of Defense (DOD) pours billions of dollars into orchestrating thousands of cooperative activities with security forces and officials globally, aimed at fortifying its partnerships. Among these investments, the DOD's Regional Defense Fellowship Program (RDFP) and the Department of State's (DOS) International Military Education and Training (IMET) initiative stand out. These programs extend educational and training opportunities to foreign military and civilian personnel from partner nations, nurturing relationships among international military allies, facilitating the exchange of military systems information, fostering military professionalism, and instilling human rights and democratic values.

Nevertheless, lingering doubts persist regarding the efficacy of these security cooperation endeavors in advancing US objectives. What strategies prove fruitful, and which falter? Do these investments deliver the anticipated dividends? What is the return on investment (ROI) for the United States? Assessing program effectiveness now poses a mounting challenge to security cooperation efforts. To attain desired strategic outcomes, the United States must meticulously allocate resources and delineate priorities for both short-term and long-term objectives.

As part of a broader study, this qualitative analysis delves into the perspectives and insights of US personnel on the ground, particularly those stationed in countries bordering the Indo-Pacific Ocean. The study scrutinizes interview responses concerning the RDFP and IMET programs from security cooperation officers (SCO) and/or local employees directly involved in executing security cooperation tasks. The report hones in on training components, including course selection, candidate selection, the current state of program implementation, ROI assessment, and potential areas for enhancement, accompanied by recommendations for improvement.

The Rising Importance of the Indo-Pacific Region

The 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* asserts that “the United States is an Indo-Pacific power.”⁴ The Indo-Pacific construct connects seven continents: Africa, Europe, Asia, the Americas, Australia, and Antarctica. This region propels nearly two-thirds

³ *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington: Department of Defense, February 2006), <https://history.defense.gov/>.

⁴ *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington: The White House, February, 2022), 4, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

of global economic growth, with its nations emerging as vital trade and investment partners for the United States. Yet, it also represents a delicate security landscape due to the escalating influence of the People's Republic of China across economic, diplomatic, technological, and military domains. China's Belt and Road Initiative, coupled with its coercive tactics and military assertiveness, poses threats that challenge the principles underpinning the US-led international order, including human rights and international law.

Meanwhile, Russia, while portraying itself as a neutral partner to many regional countries, wields a significant level of political, economic, and military influence.⁵ Moscow has been cultivating diplomatic relationships with key countries in the Indo-Pacific region. For instance, it has been providing diplomatic support to China on Indo-Pacific issues.⁶ Despite the West's pressure to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, many countries in the Indo-Pacific region have refused to join Western sanctions.⁷ Russia's reengagement in the Indo-Pacific region is driven by economic ambitions, with Moscow seeking extensive exploration and extraction of key natural resources, establishing a more robust supply chain, and hoping to export its sanctioned energy resources. Additionally, Russia has been increasing its military maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific region, often in collaboration with China.

Indo-Pacific nations play a pivotal role in shaping the international order, with potential implications for the United States and its allies and partners.⁸ The region is a pivotal maritime crossroads, where crucial sea routes converge. These sea routes are vital for global trade, making the region a key player in global economic stability and growth. The decisions made by the nations in this region can have far-reaching implications for global trade policies and practices. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific nations are not just passive observers in the geopolitical competition between major powers. They are actively shaping the rules and norms of the international system. For instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an organization of 10 Southeast Asian countries, has been instrumental in promoting dialogue and cooperation in the region. Its centrality in the regional architecture has been recognized by all major powers, including the United States, China, and Russia. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific nations are increasingly asserting their strategic autonomy. They are navigating the intensifying competition between the

⁵ Anna Batta, "Russia in the Indo-Pacific Region," in *Indo-Pacific Strategies and Foreign Policy Challenges: The US-China Strategic Competition*, ed. Hyunji Rim and James Platte (New York: Routledge, 2023), 133–47.

⁶ David Batashvili, "Why Russia Will Keep Supporting China in the Indo-Pacific," *The Diplomat*, 16 March 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁷ Derek Grossman, "Why Most of the Indo-Pacific Tiptoes around Russia," *RAND* (blog), 7 April 2022, <https://www.rand.org/>.

⁸ *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*.

United States and China, and now the emerging conflict between the United States and Russia. These nations are leveraging their strategic locations, economic strengths, and diplomatic ties to negotiate better terms with these major powers

Despite the Indo-Pacific's dependence on bilateral power dynamics, predominantly between the United States and China, a balanced power equilibrium has yet to materialize. The United States assumes a crucial security role in the region, while China aspires to establish itself as a normative power. Although both Washington and Beijing aim for regional security and stability, their visions and approaches diverge. Many nations seek to benefit from the US presence while avoiding confrontations with China, which wields growing influence across trade, diplomacy, cyber, space technology, and military capabilities. This dynamic places several Indo-Pacific countries, particularly those in East Asia, in a conundrum as they navigate between competing visions of the United States and China. Consequently, they refrain from aligning completely with the United States.

This geopolitical uncertainty fuels concerns within Washington regarding the potential swing of Indo-Pacific nations toward Chinese influence in the absence of robust US leadership. Ultimately, the strategic competition between the United States and China is poised to shape the regional security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

The strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region is poised to intensify in the twenty-first century. There is an imperative to forge rule-based regional orders, synchronize US values with those of partners and allies, bolster collective capacity, capitalize on regional opportunities, and be ready to confront anticipated challenges. Examining US security cooperation education and training endeavors in the Indo-Pacific, along with their methodologies and lessons learned, holds considerable merit.

Methodology

This evaluative study centers on uncovering insights and comprehension from individuals integral to security cooperation efforts. To gain deeper insights into RDFP and IMET education and training activities, as well as alumni contributions in partner nations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with US personnel stationed in Colombia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Mexico, and Thailand. While these countries span different continents, they fall within the ambit of the Indo-Pacific region and are influenced by both the United States and China.

The evaluation team reached out to US military and civilian personnel directly engaged in RDFP and IMET security cooperation initiatives, employing snowball sampling to expand the pool of interviewees. After identifying key participants meeting the criteria, the team solicited referrals to identify additional individuals

involved in defense cooperation missions. Each country was represented by at least two participants, with interviews lasting 60–90 minutes conducted via Zoom.gov. All interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording feature and securely archived, while interviewers also maintained written notes. Subsequently, interview data were transcribed for systematic analysis, focusing on identifying recurring patterns within the data.⁹

Findings

RDFP and IMET education and training initiatives encompass a diverse array of activities, spanning technical training, English language instruction, seminars, and workshops on professional military education (PME), including both undergraduate- and graduate-level education. Course selection by the United States and partner nations is guided by country-specific objectives outlined in the Combined Education and Training Program Plan (CETPP), with candidate selection overseen by partner nations. Eligibility for courses in the United States is contingent upon candidates passing an English proficiency test. The primary aim of these educational programs is to foster relationship and partnership building while advancing both US and partner nation objectives. Providing personnel from partner nations with opportunities to immerse themselves in US culture, democratic principles, and values serves to deepen their understanding of US expectations and operational methods.

According to insights gleaned from interviews, alumni generally express satisfaction with their experiences upon returning from their studies. They often take pride in their achievements and are expected to leverage their newfound knowledge to contribute positively to their home countries by applying their skills and working towards improvement.

Partner nations overall desire to have RDFP and IMET funds in their countries. The education and training provided by the United States are held in high esteem by partner nations. Candidates view their selection for RDFP and IMET programs as both an honor and a privilege. Through these programs, candidates acquire valuable skills and knowledge from US education and training activities. Depending on the circumstances in their home country, alumni often experience career advancement, with some securing promotions upon their return. ROIs for the United States may manifest in both short-term and long-term outcomes, but challenges exist in realizing these anticipated returns.

⁹ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015), 25.

Course Selection

Courses are chosen based on US country objectives and partner nation priorities. The contents of the course catalog often influence this selection process. The Security Cooperation Education and Training Working Group (SCETWG) furnishes the course catalog to partner nations, allowing each host nation to determine the type of course required within their borders. Some variation in course selection exists depending on the country. While some partner nations select courses based on invitations from the US embassy team, others engage in negotiations with the United States, seeking a balance between their own needs and US objectives. For instance, Ethiopia typically requests courses tailored for senior officers, whereas the United States places greater emphasis on training lower-level officers—such as captains, lieutenants, and cadets—who are instrumental in shaping the future force. Negotiations are conducted to bridge any disparities between partner nations' and US preferences.

The availability of funding and the source thereof also influence course selection. IMET funding, favored by the DOS, is often directed toward PME, while Foreign Military Sales (FMS) funds are allocated for technical training, such as aircraft maintenance. Notably, due to their status as high-priority countries for the United States, Ethiopia and Colombia receive additional resources, facilitating expanded course offerings. As expressed by US personnel, “We would take what the partner nation asked us for, which in a lot of cases was senior level PME, and really go back, relook at their requirements, and try to match some of what they asked for, but with some of what we thought would best suit both the USG and them.”¹⁰ “There is no cookie-cutter. It’s all in us talking, and we refine it; it takes months and years.”¹¹

Despite concerted efforts by both the United States and partner nations to align education and training activities with country objectives, disparities persist between the courses offered by the US and the requirements of partner nations. For instance, in the context of the five-year plan between the United States and Mexico, wherein military leaders from both nations establish strategic priorities with mutual understanding, a potential gap emerges between the expectations of partner nations and those of the United States. This planning process includes aligning training with country priorities. Once courses are selected for the upcoming five-year period, they tend to remain unchanged and repetitive. Consequently, many of the courses

¹⁰ Military, Ethiopia, interview with the author.

¹¹ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

offered in Mexico focus on counterterrorism rather than addressing emerging issues within the country.

In contrast to the US military, the Mexican military often collaborates with civilians in various domains, such as law enforcement and emergency management. Introducing programs related to civil-military relationships could prove beneficial for the country. As one interviewee pointed out, “Mexico would like to see more civil-military relationship courses, more illegal immigration-related courses instead of too many counterterrorism courses.”¹² Despite changes in Mexico’s judicial system, the RDFP courses have yet to adapt to these developments in the course catalog. This misalignment between RDFP/IMET courses and the immediate needs of the host country can result in low participation rates.

Not all courses align with country objectives. Despite Mexico’s aim of providing chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosives (CBRNE) training to the Mexican Armed Forces, none of the RDFP courses address this critical topic. A similar situation arises concerning their objectives regarding port security against illicit trafficking. This disconnect is observed in other countries as well. For instance, Georgia expresses a desire for more political courses as it seeks to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and bolster its defenses against Russian aggression.

Regardless of the specific focus of the courses, the principles of human rights and democratic governance appear to be integrated into the curriculum, whether for technical training or graduate-level professional military education. As one respondent emphasized, “There will be human rights components in whatever you do. If you’re working on something nothing to do with human rights . . . how to turn the wrench, you will have training on human rights.”¹³

Candidate Selection

Based on interview data from Colombia, Georgia, Ethiopia, Mexico, and Thailand, RDFP and IMET activities exhibit similar yet varied approaches in their program implementations with partner nations. Despite their affiliation with the US government, candidate and course selection may diverge depending on partner nations’ circumstances and needs. These factors can encompass military structure, domestic political dynamics, business practices, country objectives, gender composition, specific course prerequisites, funding availability, the depth of partner nations’ relationship with the United States, and the impact of pandemics or epidemics.

¹² Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

¹³ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

The United States does not partake in candidate selection. Instead, upon receiving invitations for particular courses, the US security cooperation embassy team facilitates formal communication between the United States and partner nations. This official announcement, disseminated to the partner nation's Ministry of Defense (MOD), typically includes detailed criteria for course selection, US expectations, required ranks and positions, academic prerequisites, and the number of available slots. The host nation assumes the responsibility of selecting candidates and forwards their nominations to the US embassy team.

Upon receipt of the host country's nominations, the United States administers English proficiency tests and conducts Leahy vetting.¹⁴ Candidates undergo biometric and eye scan tests, and they are even required to provide information about their grandparents. Although the specifics of how host nations nominate candidates are not extensively reported to the United States, the subsequent selection process tends to adhere to principles of equity, inclusivity, and transparency.

Despite the absence of official reports, partner nations appear to exercise discretion in selecting candidates based on their respective priorities. This selection process can take various forms: competitive assessments, individual database evaluations, personal networks, or alignment with candidates' assigned home-country duties and academic requisites. Furthermore, the partner nation's rapport with the United States appears to exert influence.

For nearly three decades, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) held sway as a prominent political force in Ethiopia, operating within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, which governed the nation from 1991 to 2018. On 2 April 2018, Abiy Ahmed made history as the first prime minister of Ethiopia of Oromo descent. Ahmed's academic journey led him to earn a master's degree in transformational leadership in 2011 from the International Leadership Institute in Addis Ababa, in collaboration with Greenwich University in London. Notably, Ahmed's tenure has been marked by a commitment to reform and has garnered international acclaim for his peace efforts, culminating in the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Leading up to Ahmed's inauguration, Ethiopia confronted the entrenched dominance of the Tigrayan tribe, characterized by pervasive nepotism. This internal power dynamic significantly influenced the country's candidate selection processes and opportunity distribution. Despite Ethiopia's diverse mosaic of nearly 300 ethnic groups, Tigrayans disproportionately

¹⁴ *Leahy vetting* encompasses two statutory provisions barring the US government from allocating funds for aid to units of foreign security forces upon credible information linking said unit to gross violations of human rights (GVHR). This law applies to both the DOD and DOS. Torture, extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, and rape under color of law are deemed GVHRs by the US government in enforcing this vetting.

secured opportunities in programs like RDFP and IMET. However, the ascension of a new Western-educated prime minister who is ostensibly aligned with US principles signaled a paradigm shift toward broader inclusivity and opportunity.¹⁵

Conversely, Colombia's candidate selection prioritizes individuals engaged in counterterrorism efforts, vetting candidates to ensure alignment with specific RDFP course criteria. Georgia's approach emphasizes a balanced representation across military ranks and civilian roles, including a modest percentage of women (5–8 percent of military personnel). Meanwhile, Mexico adopts a dual-candidate strategy, appointing a primary candidate alongside an alternate, facilitating flexibility in meeting requirements and adapting to evolving circumstances.

Each country's military structure evidently shapes the landscape of education and training opportunities. Take Georgia, for instance, where the military leans heavily toward officers, leaving a dearth in the noncommissioned officer (NCO) ranks. Consequently, officers find themselves more involved in RDFP and IMET undertakings. With a focus predominantly on land forces, Georgia's military is predominantly army-centric. To recalibrate this structural imbalance, the United States prioritizes bolstering the NCO cadre and dispatches candidates for NCO training to acquaint them with American NCO roles and responsibilities. Additionally, Georgia dispatches candidates to various service academies, including those for the air force and navy.

Similarly, Ethiopia grapples with a comparable scenario. Historically, Ethiopia has directed RDFP and IMET initiatives toward mid- and senior-level officers. Consequently, numerous high-ranking officers benefited from these programs until the watershed moment of 2018 when the country underwent a political transition. The current exigencies of the nation also play a pivotal role in senior officer selection. Ethiopia endeavors to bridge the leadership gap within its defense forces, particularly addressing the dearth of formal academic military education and training among senior leaders.

While partner nations hold the responsibility for nominating candidates, the United States wields authority over the allocation of slots allotted to each country, thereby exerting a substantial influence on candidate selection. The allocation of slots entails a redistribution of resources among partner nations, prompting a keen awareness among them regarding the potential consequences of slot loss, thus fostering a competitive environment for slot acquisition.

To mitigate the risk of admitting individuals of questionable integrity or those unable to pass the rigorous human rights vetting process, the United States can

¹⁵ Hilary Matfess and Anne Lauder, "After Agreement in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, What Stands in the Way of Lasting Peace?," *IPI Global Observatory*, 7 February 2023, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/>.

caution partner nations about the possibility of slot reduction. In instances where partner nations fail to present candidates meeting the expected criteria set by the United States, the withholding of slots serves as a consequential measure. As one participant underscored, “If you don’t use what’s given to you, you’re not going to get it again.”¹⁶

Furthermore, the United States possesses the prerogative to stipulate preferences or requirements within the official communication dispatched to partner nations. For instance, the officio may articulate the US preference for increased female and civilian participation in education and training programs.

Countries prioritized by the United States for additional funding tend to allocate more resources toward the development of their candidates. Georgia stands out as a particularly high-priority nation, notably within the European Command’s strategic purview. Georgia has consistently dispatched a significant number of candidates to both short- and long-term RDFP and IMET programs in the United States and Europe, underscoring its strong commitment to fostering a robust military partnership with the United States and NATO. Aspiring to achieve parity and interoperability with US forces, Georgia makes substantial investments in its candidates and adopts a discerning approach to candidate selection. However, despite meticulous vetting processes, instances arise where candidates fall short of expectations. As one respondent recounted, “We’ve had students that have failed out just recently, failed out of West Point.”¹⁷

External factors such as pandemics or epidemics can disrupt candidate selection processes for RDFP and IMET activities. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, military resources have been redirected towards providing real-world support for pandemic response efforts. Consequently, various challenges have emerged, including a scarcity of candidates, candidates failing to meet designated timelines, and candidates failing to meet requirements. In such scenarios, the United States may face constraints in accepting qualified candidates if, for instance, partner nations fail to respond to calls for candidates, experience sudden cancellations, or are unable to adhere to timelines for biographical, biometric, and Leahy vetting processes.

Female Candidates

The United States has undertaken continuous endeavors to enhance the representation of women in RDFP and IMET activities. However, the extent of women’s participation often hinges on gender demographics and the status of

¹⁶ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

¹⁷ Military, Georgia, interview with the author.

females within partner nations' military hierarchies. Notably, in several partner nations such as Thailand, Ethiopia, and Mexico, women are rarely elevated to higher echelons of military leadership, reflecting persisting adherence to traditional gender roles entrenched in many cultures. Consequently, the limited military ranks attained by women often render them ineligible for RDFP and IMET opportunities.

For instance, in Mexico, RDFP courses predominantly cater to higher-ranking officers, typically requiring candidates to hold the rank of O4 and above, a rank seldom achieved by females. Consequently, when partner nations do nominate female candidates for education and training, they are often relegated to lower- to mid-grade officer-level courses, primarily for auxiliary roles.

Moreover, the specifications outlined for certain RDFP courses can further impede female participation. Partner nations may allocate RDFP funds to specific military units, as seen in Colombia's provision of educational and training opportunities tailored for counterterrorism-related special operation units, where women are notably scarce. Consequently, despite the intentions of the United States to promote gender inclusivity, RDFP funds may not be utilized for training women.

The dearth of women in partner nations' military structures exacerbates the scarcity of female candidates in RDFP and IMET educational endeavors. As one participant underscored, "In the special forces community, there are no females whatsoever."¹⁸

English language proficiency requirements also play a significant role in shaping female participation rates. In countries such as Ethiopia, men often outperform women on English proficiency tests, resulting in a higher number of men meeting the minimum language requirement. Consequently, given the mandatory English testing prerequisite for RDFP and IMET programs, a greater proportion of men tend to engage in education and training activities funded by the United States.

Conversely, in Georgia, women enjoy equal opportunities as men to partake in RDFP and IMET endeavors. Despite the limited representation of women within the Georgian military, access to these programs is not contingent upon gender or rank.

The endeavor to boost female participation is an ongoing commitment, evidenced by the allocation of additional funding aimed at incentivizing increased female engagement. When US security cooperation personnel advocate for greater female participation within partner nations, it seems to sway their selection of female candidates. As highlighted by one interviewee, "Dr. XX does a tremendous job. Women, Peace and Security, she pushes that WPS agenda. They are getting a lot better at including women in their courses and I believe a lot has to do with Dr. XX."¹⁹

¹⁸ Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.

¹⁹ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

English Proficiency Requirement

Once partner nations nominate candidates, the English Comprehension Level (ECL) test becomes a pivotal assessment tool. The test aims to gauge candidates' capacity to comprehend US course content and adhere to US education and training standards. Candidates who achieve the minimum required score and pass the Leahy vetting process are subsequently sent to the designated schools. For those requiring additional English support, avenues such as waiver requests from the embassy team or enrollment at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC) in San Antonio, Texas, are pursued.

Given that English may not be the native or even secondary language for many citizens of partner nations, candidates often encounter challenges with English proficiency. In Ethiopia, for instance, a significant number of senior officers, women, and NCOs struggle to meet the initial language criteria. Additionally, some military personnel opt not to take the English test for fear of potential repercussions on their social standing.

As a result, the English proficiency test serves as a gatekeeper in candidate selection and could impede partner nations' ability to nominate highly qualified individuals. To secure allocated RDFP and IMET slots, partner nations prioritize individuals capable of meeting the minimum English requirements. Consequently, there is a tendency for partner nations to repeatedly select the same individuals rather than actively seeking out the most suitable candidates to align with both US and partner nations' objectives. As noted by one respondent, "They don't have English . . . they need to write and do essays and you know, express themselves like a college student. They send the same person. They send the same person that has the English."²⁰

This recurrent selection pattern may not always result in the most qualified candidates being chosen, potentially impacting their influence within their respective services or hindering their prospects for swift promotion. As highlighted by a US personnel, "A lot of times the Thai military is tied to not wanting to give up those courses . . . but at the same time, I'm not quite sure if everybody that we're sending is the person that's moving up the fastest or has the most influence in their service."²¹

Return on Investment

"This is cooperation. . . . It's a business transaction in a way. It's not just you give free training, and you don't give us anything back."²²

²⁰ Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.

²¹ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

²² Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

In the business sector, ROI is regarded as “a primary tool for decision-making for capital investments.”²³ Conversely, tracking and quantifying ROI in security cooperation, particularly in RDFP and IMET education and training activities, presents formidable challenges, with outcomes often remaining obscure. Nonetheless, certain returns may manifest more conspicuously over time.

RDFP and IMET initiatives yield both immediate and enduring returns. Short-term benefits typically materialize relatively swiftly and are characterized by their tangible nature. These may include the immediate application of newly acquired knowledge and technical skills, the acknowledgment of candidates within partner nations, and ongoing efforts by partner nations to align with US standards.

On the other hand, long-term returns may unfold gradually over decades and often encompass intangible aspects. These may encompass the depth and breadth of partnerships forged between the United States and partner nations, shaped by enduring human connections and a mutual comprehension of each other’s doctrines, values, and cultural norms. Certain ROIs may transition from short-term effects to enduring outcomes over time.

The United States encounters challenges in realizing ROIs from partner nations, attributed to various factors such as the underutilization of US-trained human resources, potential turnover within military personnel, or partner nations’ absence of mandatory service requirements, particularly following the receipt of US-funded education. Regarding education and training, technical training typically yields immediate returns, whereas PME tends to yield long-term benefits. As one respondent remarked, “You don’t get an immediate return on investment when it comes to IMET.”²⁴

Examples of short-term ROI are as follows:

1. **Alumni on a good career track.** Short-term ROI can be observed through the career trajectories of RDFP and IMET alumni upon their return to their home countries following completion of their education and/or training in the United States. Alumni often secure positions of significance within their respective nations, garnering recognition and assuming roles that can have a transformative impact, as evidenced in countries like Georgia, Mexico, and Ethiopia. Notably, many high-ranking government officials in Georgia have received education in the West, fostering a close working relationship between the United States and partner nations. This

²³ James F. Smith, “Using return on investment and resiliency return on investment for preparedness,” *Public Administration Review* 84, no. 2, (March 2024): 213–17, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁴ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

collaborative spirit is exemplified by the close coordination between the Georgian MOD and the US Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC).

Similarly, in Ethiopia, IMET graduates frequently ascend to more promising career tracks upon their return. They are often assigned roles within military education and training institutions or various directorates of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) headquarters. The presence of these professionally educated military officers within such institutions serves to enhance command and control capabilities. They wield influence in shaping leadership practices and play a pivotal role in the development of defense force capabilities, fostering reliance, discipline, accountability, and professional standards necessary for effective mission execution. As one participant affirmed, “Most IMET and RDFP graduates held a position within the defense force. Some are office holders at headquarters level, while others are commanders and instructors in different training institutions.”²⁵

2. **Alumni contribution to partner nation military.** The ability of RDFP and IMET alumni to effect change by applying the knowledge, skills, and expertise acquired in the United States represents another instance of short-term ROI. In Ethiopia, for instance, graduates of US PME programs played a pivotal role in establishing the country’s first War College in 2019. Drawing from their educational experiences in the United States, these alumni developed the curriculum independently, thereby enhancing the ENDF’s command-and-control capabilities. Furthermore, US-trained professionals are actively engaged in crafting a national military white paper, which will inform the ENDF’s new doctrine and force structure. As one respondent succinctly articulated, “I got to send folks and see them come back and make an impact.”²⁶

Similar transformative contributions have been witnessed in Thailand, where the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) designed its curriculum modeled after the US CGSC curriculum. These initiatives, whether in the form of curriculum development or the formulation of white papers, are tangible products of short-term ROI.

3. **Alumni contributions beyond the military.** RDFP and IMET alumni extend their contributions beyond the realm of the military, influencing broader societal contexts. Notably, the United Nations (UN) and European

²⁵ Civilian, Ethiopia, interview with the author.

²⁶ Military, Ethiopia, interview with the author.

Union (EU) have recognized Georgia's advancements in its electoral system, attributing improvements to the adoption of Western principles and values, including freedom of speech and democratic election procedures.

4. **Technical training and foreign military sales.** ROI manifests through the technical training imparted by the United States to partner nations. This training enables these nations to independently operate new aircraft and US military equipment. RDFP and IMET education and training initiatives equip partner nations, such as Colombia and Thailand, with the necessary skills to utilize, maintain, and ensure secure communications for aircraft and other equipment procured from the United States. As partner nations enhance their self-reliance with US equipment, it fosters opportunities for increased US military sales, thereby promoting interoperability.
5. **Interoperability.** The ability to utilize shared equipment fosters interoperability between the United States and partner nations. While immediate US-partner nation interoperability may be considered a short-term ROI, it has the potential to evolve into enduring benefits over time. For instance, Thailand and the United States conducted joint exercises in Hawaii utilizing US equipment. Thanks to the training provided on the operation of US equipment, the Thai military could participate in exercises like Lightning Forge without the need to transport weapons from their own inventory, such as Stryker vehicles. Moreover, the Royal Thai Army is undergoing modernization and restructuring efforts aligned with US doctrine, facilitating enhanced communication and cooperation between the two nations in training environments.

This shared operational approach facilitates bilateral or multilateral interoperability, where nations collaborate toward common objectives, such as regional or international peacekeeping operations. For example, Georgia has deployed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan alongside the United States in the fight against terrorism. Similarly, Ethiopia has contributed troops to Somalia as a partner nation in support of US objectives.

6. **Emergency collaborations.** In addition to promoting interoperability, RDFP and IMET activities play a crucial role in meeting mission requirements, particularly during emergencies that necessitate humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and special operations. PME facilitates the establishment of a shared doctrinal understanding and fosters effective communication and collaboration between the United States and partner nations, thereby strengthening working relationships with counterparts.

An illustrative example of this collaboration occurred in Colombia when a malfunctioning US military aircraft encountered landing gear issues. Leveraging their shared doctrine and personal and professional relationships forged through RDFP and IMET activities, the US and Colombian Air Forces collaborated seamlessly to safely land the plane. Moreover, during natural disasters, partner nations can collaborate with the United States on rescue plans and other pertinent countermeasures, leveraging the synergies established through RDFP and IMET initiatives.

7. **Efforts to meet US standards.** RDFP and IMET programs serve to familiarize partner nations with the standards upheld by the United States, which they are encouraged to adhere to in order to maximize the benefits of US education and training. Partner nations generally exhibit a preference for leveraging RDFP and IMET opportunities. To safeguard their allocated slots, partner nations diligently endeavor to meet the rigorous standards and expectations set forth by the United States. These efforts often involve educating their populace about the fundamental principles prized by the United States.

For instance, Colombia remains committed to educating legal professionals and members of the judiciary on the paramount importance of human rights. Colombia's proactive stance on human rights education is underscored by the observations of neighboring countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, which have faced repercussions in the form of revoked RDFP and IMET support due to human rights violations. Consequently, Colombia remains vigilant in promoting and instilling the ethos of human rights, particularly in regions where the influence of narco-trafficking organizations is minimal.

8. **US as the first partner of choice.** The favorable outcomes of RDFP and IMET educational and training initiatives prompt partner nations to prioritize the United States as their preferred security cooperation partner. Partner nations consistently opt to engage with the United States in matters of security cooperation. Through procurement assistance and the training of proficient individuals to uphold and sustain acquired products, the United States fosters a mutually beneficial arrangement for both nations.



Figure 1. Short-term return on investment

One of the foremost objectives of security cooperation is to cultivate enduring partnerships and shared objectives between the United States and partner nations. The efficacy of long-term ROI is often gauged indirectly, such as by assessing the sustainability of relationships forged among US and partner nation personnel trained together in RDFP and IMET activities, as well as the proficiency of alumni in implementing US principles and values in their roles. As articulated by an interviewee, “The best return on our investment for IMET is when we get somebody back, who is a trained leader, who knows how to work in a NATO interoperable setting.”²⁷ While short-term ROI might have intangible aspects, their effects could be more influential in the long run.

1. **Instillment of democratic principles and human rights.** RDFP and IMET education and training initiatives have exposed alumni to democratic principles and values of human rights. Participation in these programs, as well as residing in the United States and other Western nations, fosters a deeper comprehension of the fundamental values that underpin US domestic and foreign policies. As noted by one respondent, “Some of them have already been to . . . U.S. training and education, and did see . . . a broader lens towards human rights and more of an understanding of basic

²⁷ Military, Georgia, interview with the author.

human rights. . . . Whereas, students that haven't had any kind of U.S. cultural or educational experience may not have seen the importance of it."²⁸

2. **Alumni making changes at home with embedded US values.** Acquiring an understanding of US values and norms has played a pivotal role in shaping professional military conduct, fostering respect for human rights, and promoting civilian control of the military. As observed by a US personnel, "Six months they had spent in the U.S. that year . . . Western values and cultures, the respect for human rights had been ingrained in their thinking."²⁹ Additionally, alumni demonstrate an enhanced regard for civil governance. Upon returning to their respective nations, alumni apply the knowledge gained in the United States, thereby contributing to the development and progress of their homeland while upholding embedded US values.
3. **Influencing partner nation's military education.** US PME has the potential to shape the military education of partner nations by influencing their curriculum. Notably, the curriculum at the Thai CGSC draws heavily from the US CGSC curriculum. While this curriculum furnishes a fundamental framework for military operations and may facilitate short-term interoperability, its US influence could also exert a lasting impact on the cognitive processes, decision making, and operational approaches of military professionals in partner nations. As noted by one participant, "Even though the vocabulary was a little challenging, the base ideas I felt were very much the same."³⁰
4. **Professionalization and alignment of partner nation military structure to the United States.** RDFP and IMET activities play a crucial role in harmonizing the military structures of partner nations with that of the United States. Many partner nations face challenges in terms of assets, personnel, and resources compared to the US military. Despite these disparities, Georgia endeavors to emulate the PME framework of the United States. The organizational and structural model of the US military serves as a blueprint for numerous partner nations. As noted by one respondent, "Anytime we get an opportunity to bring them here . . . they see our culture. It helps them professionalize their military and align a lot of what they do with what we do here in the U.S. and the way our militaries are set up. . . ."

²⁸ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

²⁹ Military, Ethiopia, interview with the author.

³⁰ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

They're having a big push on training NCOs in the Mexican Marine Corps. That's huge because they never used to do that."³¹

Adopting a structured and professionalized corps akin to that of the United States helps mitigate turnover, as personnel can fulfill multiple roles. Exposure to hands-on experiences during stays in the United States facilitates the assimilation of partner nations into the structure and conduct of the US military. The same respondent also emphasized that "professionalization starts to take place not only in the officer corps but in the enlisted corps. You can see it through all the services."³²

5. **Expanding world outlook and strategizing common pursuits.** Participation in RDFP and IMET activities alongside diverse US partner nations fosters heightened awareness and broadens participants' perspectives. For instance, when addressing challenges like illegal fishing, border security, and narco-trafficking, participants discover that other countries, particularly those within the same region, confront similar issues. By exchanging anecdotes about challenging circumstances in their respective home countries, candidates gain insights into shared concerns, interests, and strategies for pursuing common objectives collaboratively as a unified team.
6. **Human relationship building.** The bonds forged through personal connections established as classmates and friends, where shared learning experiences and exposure to ideas are commonplace, play a pivotal role in fostering trust and relationships. Shared proficiency in professionalism aids in communication and comprehension. As underscored by one personnel, "It's easier to communicate . . . if we meet one day somewhere and we will be talking about the progress of our relation, country relationship, and whatever. It will be going to be much easier in the future than if we have never met each other, and if we have never seen each other. So, when classmates work together, it's great. I mean, it's wonderful."³³

The human connections cultivated through RDFP and IMET activities facilitate the establishment of collaborative bonds, even in later stages of one's career when alumni assume leadership roles. As one respondent posited, "You can have two high-level leaders who can relate immediately based on what they have done even though they don't speak the same

³¹ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

³² Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

³³ Civilian, Georgia, interview with the author.

language very well. They can relate to having done the same thing even if it's just airborne school, jumping out of an airplane. Being able to make that immediate connection is huge. At the end of the day, we're human beings, and we like to connect with one another. If we can connect with one another, it makes it easier. . . . It's human nature."³⁴ Consequently, RDFP and IMET activities have contributed to improved resource management, strategic planning and execution, and logistical programs—essentially enhancing bilateral and NATO interoperability.

7. **A better understanding of US culture.** Residing in the United States, interacting with Americans, and observing American lifestyles, ideologies, and business practices provide firsthand experiential learning opportunities that deepen comprehension of US culture and operational methods. This heightened cultural awareness and understanding can facilitate intercultural communication and foster tolerance toward divergent perspectives.

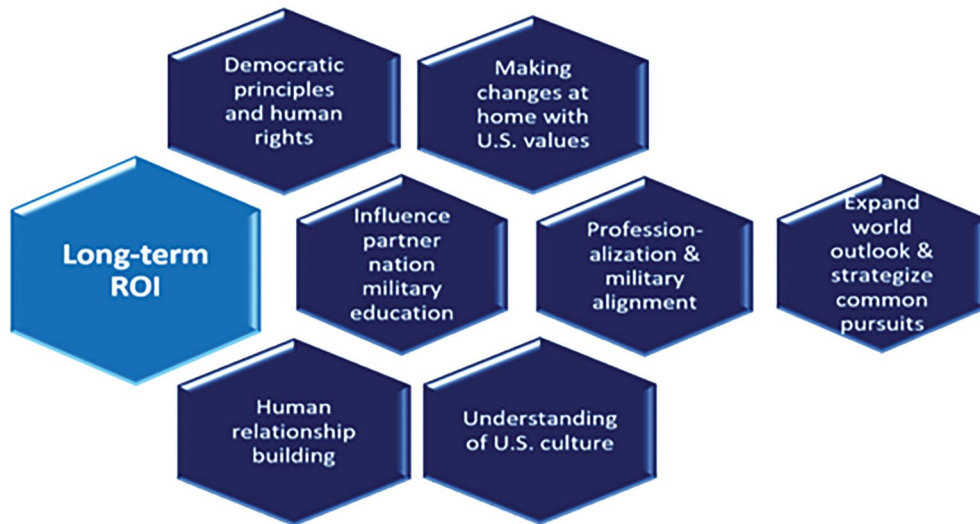


Figure 2. Long-term return on investment

Challenges to ROI

RDFP and IMET activities serve as potent tools for fostering relationships between US personnel and their counterparts in partner nations, enabling the transmission of American culture across all echelons, from NCOs to senior officers.

³⁴ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

However, converting an initial positive encounter into a lasting outcome that benefits the United States poses a significant challenge. As noted by one interviewee, “It’s one thing to have a personal relationship coming out of IMET-fund but it’s quite another to provide a long-lasting U.S. cultural experience that officers or NCOs in some cases can take back to their country and then that would continue to blossom and share throughout their military ranks.”³⁵

Securing returns on investments made in RDFP and IMET activities presents difficulties for the United States. Despite expectations that partner nations would promote US-trained candidates funded through these programs as touchpoints for American interests, the reality is often different. Partner nations do not always leverage US-trained RDFP and IMET alumni effectively. In the absence of supervision from US personnel, partner nations may reintegrate alumni into their previous roles without affording them the opportunity to apply their newfound knowledge. Moreover, the positions assigned to these alumni by partner nations may not align adequately with their acquired education. As one participant observed, “We have noticed anecdotally, some situations were like, take a war college graduate or CGSC graduate, and we’ll put him or her into a position that is not commensurate with the education they have.”³⁶ Another participant expressed, “Sometimes if I’m not careful . . . they just send them back to their units and that slot is lost because you’re not using the assets I’m giving you.”³⁷

The absence of mandatory service requirements following completion of RDFP and IMET activities poses a significant hurdle to realizing US ROI. As one interviewee confirmed, “Not every country does this effect, most don’t.”³⁸ Partner nations often operate under their own human resource systems, which may diverge from US practices. In some cases, countries lack mechanisms mandating additional service obligations upon receipt of US-funded education. As another interviewee highlighted, “They can just take their four-year education that we just paid for and go on to the civilian sector.”³⁹

Likewise, personnel turnover within partner nations’ militaries presents a formidable challenge. Not all partner nations possess the capacity to retain and apply the knowledge and skills acquired by alumni from the United States. It is imperative for partner nations to prioritize professionalization efforts and ensure the continued maintenance and utilization of US-procured platforms.

³⁵ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

³⁶ Military, Georgia, interview with the author.

³⁷ Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.

³⁸ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

³⁹ Military, Georgia, interview with the author.

Discussion and Recommendations

RDFP and IMET activities serve as crucial avenues for partner nations to gain insight into the workings of the United States and its perspectives on global issues. Engaging in these educational programs fosters a deeper understanding of both the United States and other nations, thereby facilitating communication within interoperable, collaborative teams. As one respondent underscored, “I think it takes that decades-long relationship-building to really benefit influence later on.”⁴⁰

These education and training activities provide partner nations with access to a wealth of previously unencountered knowledge. Many partner nations hold US education and training in high esteem due to its competitive nature. By participating in these activities, partner nation candidates gain invaluable insights and skills that they can apply in their respective countries, ultimately contributing to progress and advancement. The educational process also acquaints partner nations’ militaries with US values, such as human rights, and the role of the military in American society, gradually influencing people’s perspectives and thought processes. In this way, RDFP and IMET activities play a crucial role in influencing “them with our values, and they bring them back and it spreads out.”⁴¹

Moreover, irrespective of the degree of acceptance by partner nations, American values are ingrained in US products, and these embedded ideals are disseminated alongside the products themselves. As the same participant emphasized, “We sell products. We also bring with it our values and norms.”⁴²

Assessing the effectiveness of these educational activities poses significant challenges. While many US personnel interviewed perceive positive outcomes from RDFP and IMET activities, measuring the correlation between these activities and potential future decision making and partnerships with the United States proves exceedingly difficult. Unlike the business sector, where monetary compensation can be quantified to gauge return on investment, assessing returns for security cooperation education and training is not as straightforward. Instead, returns in international security cooperation are often intangible and nonmonetary.

Identifying returns on investment in international security cooperation entails evaluating the extent to which partner nations align with US strategic objectives. This alignment may manifest in various ways, such as granting US military access to regional ports, airfields, and training facilities during peacetime and contingency operations. Additionally, cooperation with interoperable missions, such as par-

⁴⁰ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

⁴¹ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

⁴² Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

ticipating in disaster response efforts, peacekeeping operations, and maritime security initiatives, provides further insight into the quality of partnership and alignment with US priorities.⁴³ Moreover, assessing the degree of military contributions from partner nations in times of conflict or crisis can also offer valuable indicators of the effectiveness of security cooperation efforts.⁴⁴

Education and training activities yield short-term returns that are more readily identifiable, while long-term effects may not manifest for decades, if at all. Short-term outcomes are easier to track, often occurring shortly after the completion of education and training. These may include alumni receiving promotions following their US education, partner nation servicemembers acquiring new technical skills such as flying or repairing fighter jets, or alumni from countries like Thailand and Ethiopia developing curricula for their military schools based on their US training.

In contrast, long-term returns are influenced by factors such as the integration of US-based military curriculum into partner nation cadets' education, which gradually shapes their decision-making processes and behaviors over time. However, assessing the impact of these long-term changes is challenging due to the cumulative nature of human relationships and the unpredictable effects of intervening factors. The complexities of human psychology further complicate efforts to track, record, or measure behavioral changes accurately.

History is replete with examples of shifting alliances, where former US allies have become adversaries. These historical precedents underscore the inherent uncertainty in predicting the future behavior of partner nations, despite the depth of relationships cultivated through education and training activities.

Nonetheless, RDFP and IMET activities serve as foundational pillars for burgeoning US-partner nation relationships. These programs not only establish a knowledge base and foster personal and professional connections but also serve as gateways to additional opportunities. In an era marked by great-power competition and the presence of multiple superpowers, RDFP and IMET activities emerge as strategic tools to cultivate and sustain connections, reaffirming US presence in the Indo-Pacific region where neither alliance against the United States nor China exists.

RDFP and IMET activities serve as ongoing reminders of US soft power and co-optive influence, which can induce changes in behaviors and attitudes through attraction. For nations gradually opening their doors to the United States, these

⁴³ Zach Gold, Ralph Espach, Nicholas Bradford, and Douglas Jackson, "A better way to measure returns on U.S. security cooperation investments," in *Defense One* (June 2021), <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/06/better-way-measure-returns-us-security-cooperation-investments/174742/>

⁴⁴ Desmond Walton, *Security cooperation: The key to access and influence in the Asia-Pacific*. (Washington, DC; Center for a New American Security, 2016).

programs represent an initial entry point—for example, Laos—while for countries with established US relationships, they offer avenues for further engagement and deepening ties. Additionally, RDFP and IMET activities serve as tools for managing relationships between the United States and its partner nations, allowing for customization based on factors such as national objectives, policies, and assistance priorities.

Despite any short- or long-term ROIs, the United States should anchor RDFP and IMET activities in long-term objectives, necessitating comprehensive, forward-looking strategies. Partner nations have the potential to send their officers for US PME and explore additional educational avenues, reinforcing US cultural values and thought processes, thereby aiding in the attainment of specific US goals. To nurture partnerships and maximize ROI, the United States should prioritize the following areas.

Continuous support of professional military education

The United States can sustain ongoing support for partner nations' professional military development, whether conducted within the United States or in the partner nation itself. To achieve lasting impact, the United States should provide training for various echelons of leadership within partner nations' militaries. By influencing perspectives, mindsets, and organizational cultures, collaborative responses toward the United States can be fostered. Therefore, it is imperative for the United States to continue offering RDFP and IMET opportunities to both military personnel and civilians.

Given the enduring nature of relationship and partnership building, the United States should advocate for the involvement of junior and mid-level personnel—individuals poised to become future leaders. Simultaneously, efforts to cultivate relationships should span across different branches of partner-nation services.

Supporting partner nations' academic institutions holds promise for yielding significant returns, particularly as it impacts a cohort of future cadets—prospective officers and engineers. The United States can aid partner nations in designing and refining curricula and courses, as well as in developing their doctrine and institutional capacity. For instance, Ethiopia's Cadet Academy relies on outdated doctrines dating back 20 years. The United States can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between past, present, and future capacity.

Despite the educational offerings extended by the United States to partner nations, the full effects of this education necessitate additional real-life interactions and exchanges between the two parties. As one respondent emphasized, "We need more real-life interactions between us. The education is very good but we need to

take a targeted effort to connect education with real-life interactions so to see the results of the education.”⁴⁵

Tailored education and training for partner nations

While the United States can offer both in-person and virtual courses, the decision on the course format should be made judiciously, considering the target audience, partner nations’ circumstances, and the objectives of the courses. In-person education and training opportunities are particularly effective for individuals in influential positions. Many senior-level officials often juggle numerous responsibilities, and virtual training may not command their full attention amidst their busy schedules. As one interviewee commented, “A lot of people that have influential positions, they are really busy. They will not take that on because that’s just the culture of Thailand. They do work really hard, and if they’re going to be here in the country, they will most likely end up doing their current job.”⁴⁶

Designing courses tailored to reflect partner nations’ social and political structures can better meet their specific needs. Not all countries possess the same social and political frameworks as the United States. For instance, in Thailand, the military does not command units like the Border Patrol Police, despite their significant role in Thai security and border affairs. Therefore, adapting course content to align with the local context can enhance partner nations’ perceptions of the United States.

Seminars can initiate discussions on topics that are neutral yet relevant to regional issues. In Southeast Asia, subjects concerning regional security and threats, such as peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime concerns, cyberwarfare, and counterterrorism, could serve as potential discussion points.

The relevance of the course content to regional or international issues plays a pivotal role in piquing the interest of partner nations for further courses. Additionally, when the United States addresses critical topics aimed at higher-level audiences, it may incentivize partner nations to send influential individuals to participate. The involvement of leadership figures, in turn, fosters broader impacts across the partner nation’s military hierarchy.

RDFP and IMET programs should reassess the level of flexibility granted for course selection. While the IMET program predominantly focuses on PME courses, it does offer more flexibility compared to RDFP. However, RDFP faces challenges as many of its courses remain unchanged year after year, making it difficult to address emerging issues. As one participant emphasized, “Receiving the same list of

⁴⁵ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

⁴⁶ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

courses that have been the same for the last three years. It will be a good thing if we look at every year based on country, strategy, team priorities and then we can support modernization by changing the catalog if it's needed."⁴⁷

Regarding course design, such as seminars and workshops, the United States should consider integrating the concepts of democratic principles and human rights alongside other course content, rather than offering them as separate courses.

Utilization of Mobile Training Teams

The United States can expand the use of mobile training teams (MTT) to reach a wider audience in partner nations. In Ethiopia, for instance, many non-Tigrayans have been deprived of RDFP and IMET opportunities for three decades. Ethiopia requires extensive education for its officers, but budget constraints prevent sending all officers to the United States. By aiding in curriculum and instructor development and enhancing institutional capacity, the United States could significantly benefit the host country.

Another advantage of deploying MTTs is the potential for partner nations to share course resources widely. Instead of sending a limited number of individuals to study abroad in the United States, partner nations could reach a broader audience and reduce costs by utilizing locally retained materials, equipment, and translations from MTTs. This approach may also enhance female participation, particularly among women who may be ineligible for US study due to lower ranks or insufficient English proficiency. By expanding the audience reached, the United States can increase its long-term relationship impact. As one respondent remarked, "If they could create a team and come down as an MTT, you touch more people."⁴⁸ Military academic institutions like the Defense Acquisition University (DAU), Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS), Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), and others could deploy additional MTTs to train partner nations' military and civilian professionals.

Train-the-trainer programs

Numerous education and training initiatives prioritize meeting predetermined quotas rather than aligning with partner nations' specific requirements. We propose implementing "train-the-trainer" programs to better address the education and training needs of partner nations. As one individual emphasized, "A lot of things

⁴⁷ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

⁴⁸ Civilian, Colombia, interview with the author.

that we need to focus on are what we call Train the Trainer programs. It's one thing to train them, but another thing for their corps to be able to train themselves on what they just learned."⁴⁹

Continuous support during political turmoil in a partner nation

When the United States identifies violations of human rights or democratic principles in a partner nation, it suspends RDFP and IMET educational and training activities in those countries. These programs are reinstated when the offending countries demonstrate progress in addressing these issues. For instance, during the political unrest in northern Ethiopia involving possible human rights violations by Tigrayan rebels, federal forces, and Eritrean forces, the United States halted all foreign assistance to the country—except for humanitarian aid—and imposed sanctions. Similarly, after a coup d'état in Thailand in 2014, RDFP and IMET activities were suspended until 2019.

While suspending these programs in response to a partner nation's violation of fundamental American values, human rights, and democratic principles is justifiable, it may also strain US partnerships with other nations. The cessation of US security cooperation funding to Ethiopia due to internal conflicts and violence has halted security assistance since 2020, further impeding Ethiopia's ability to maintain air mobility. This interruption in security cooperation activities risks undermining longstanding collaborations between the United States and Ethiopia, potentially requiring significant time to rebuild trust and stability in the partnership.

In response to internal social and political unrest in partner nations, the United States could consider offering selective program options. For instance, while suspending lethal training, it could maintain educational and cultural exchanges. Rather than completely withdrawing security assistance, the United States could continue promoting its human rights and democratic values. This approach would afford partner nations the opportunity to learn and appreciate the importance of these values. As one respondent stressed, "If we are trying to build democratic values and human rights behavior, shutting our doors is probably not the right answer. We need to open our doors more and share more of these values, to give more culture, more experience from a U.S. perspective so that they learn and understand the benefits of it and why it's important."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

⁵⁰ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

Inclusion of females

Providing courses tailored to lower-ranking officers could foster greater participation among female military professionals. Currently, there are relatively few women in high-ranking military positions. To address this gap and enhance the capacity of female military personnel, the United States should offer more entry-level courses. Given the growing importance of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, additional options should be extended to female military professionals in partner nations. As one respondent suggested, “If they don’t have females to go with the criteria of every course . . . we need to offer options so that young officer females can have an opportunity.”⁵¹

Support for English

The requirement for candidates to demonstrate a certain level of English proficiency to participate in education and training programs in the United States serves as a crucial threshold. While the aim is to select candidates who can establish strong bonds with the United States over time, some qualified individuals miss out on opportunities for RDFP and IMET activities due to inadequate English proficiency. Partner nations may overlook capable and deserving candidates simply because they lack the necessary English skills, leading to the repeated selection of the same individuals who meet language requirements. Moreover, variations in English proficiency testing scores across countries can exacerbate gender disparities in candidate selection. Consequently, the English proficiency requirement may impede the attainment of US goals and objectives. As one participant mentioned, “Some of the instructors who have had large exposure to U.S. PME and IMET funding obviously spoke English very well and they were trying to make it a point to the rest of the class . . . English is kind of the way of the future and it’s important to learn English so that we can better interoperate.”⁵²

To address this challenge, the United States can take several approaches. Firstly, RDFP and IMET programs can collaborate with other government initiatives, such as the DOS’s English Language Fellow Program and Peace Corps language programs, to provide targeted language assistance tailored to military and civilian personnel in partner nations. Secondly, these programs can leverage existing language training centers within partner nations to enhance English proficiency among the target population. Lastly, if candidates’ English proficiency falls short of US

⁵¹ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

⁵² Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

standards, MTTs can conduct localized training sessions to support their language development efforts.

Additionally, the United States should carefully assess the level of flexibility granted for candidates' English test score waivers. Should the English requirement be stringent to ensure candidates' educational success in the United States, or should the United States offer more waivers to include a broader range of candidates, rather than accommodating only a small number of officers with English proficiency?

Cultural sensitivity

Understanding partner nations' cultures is crucial for the United States to effectively engage with them and achieve mutual objectives. Without a deep understanding of partner nations' cultures, engagement between nations remains superficial and may lack authenticity. As one respondent highlighted, "If you just sit down and go to business right away, like they understand that, we're like that, . . . it kind of comes across as imposing. If you come across as imposing right away, which we're already known for, we must recognize this about ourselves, then you're going to get the minimum from whatever you're talking. Cultural understanding . . . it's a helpful tool."⁵³

When presenting a US agenda to partner nations, cultural sensitivity is paramount. For instance, when advocating for an increase in enlisted personnel in a partner nation, the approach must consider the partner nation's cultural context. Otherwise, the request may be perceived as an imposition from an external source, potentially undermining the partnership. As noted by the same respondent, "In the United States military, we have strong enlisted and non-commissioned officers, like Sergeants. There is a strong corps of that. In other militaries, they don't, and we try to impose that, and it doesn't necessarily work. It's a slow-moving thing. But we do impose is kind of a harsh word, but we do want to promote our values."⁵⁴

Understanding and respecting partner nations' cultures is essential, particularly when promoting gender equality through initiatives like the WPS agenda. While the United States may perceive gender disparities and seek to address them, partner nation perspectives may differ. In some cultures, women may feel content with their societal roles and perceive protection within their cultural context.

Recognizing these cultural and religious differences is crucial, especially when there is potential disagreement between the United States and partner nations.

⁵³ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

⁵⁴ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

Without this understanding, US efforts to promote gender equality may be met with resistance and could inadvertently cause resentment.

As one participant aptly expressed, “It’s weird when you tell someone they are not treated fairly when they think they are treated fairly. It can come across as offensive, like who are you to tell me?”⁵⁵ The United States must approach such issues with cultural sensitivity and humility. Cultural competence and effective cross-cultural communication are essential for pursuing strategic objectives while respecting partner nations’ perspectives.

While advocating for American values, the United States should avoid imposing its beliefs and practices on partner nations. Instead, it should engage in respectful dialogue and collaboration, fostering mutual understanding and partnership based on shared goals and values.

Delicate diplomacy

Effective diplomacy requires a nuanced approach when engaging with partner nations, considering their unique priorities and values that shape their governance. These priorities may not always align with those of the United States, leading to potential conflicts and unpredictable outcomes in terms of ROI. In the current era of great-power competition, not all partner nations seek alignment with the United States; some, like Thailand, prefer to maintain neutrality.

Attempting to impose US viewpoints, particularly regarding relations with major powers like China, can elicit resistance from partner nations wary of being coerced into taking sides. As one interviewee highlighted, “Thailand constantly says they don’t want to pick a side. It’s very difficult to present information that shows China in a negative light because they have the perception that we are trying to force them to choose, but at the same time, I think it’s important to try to get that across.”⁵⁶

Partner nations may also have differing levels of awareness and understanding compared to the United States, particularly in areas like information operations and cybersecurity. While the US prioritizes cybersecurity due to growing threats, some nations may inadvertently share sensitive military information through platforms like WhatsApp. This variation in practices may stem from differing threat perceptions or insufficient awareness about cybersecurity.

As one interviewee stated, “Obviously we had some growing pains because both sides are trying to understand how this is going to work and what it’s going to look

⁵⁵ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

⁵⁶ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

like, but . . . we're getting better and better."⁵⁷ This underscores the importance of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation through diplomatic efforts, recognizing and respecting partner nations' perspectives while advancing shared interests.

To strengthen partnerships, the United States can identify shared concerns with partner nations while subtly promoting its own interests. By addressing regional challenges and providing support for capacity-building initiatives such as training and education, the United States can foster mutual understanding and collaboration.

For instance, the United States is working with Thailand to enhance its maritime domain awareness, enabling the country to better combat Chinese illegal fishing activities in its territorial waters. Additionally, the United States aims to assist Thailand in bolstering its border security capabilities, modernizing its military, and addressing regional issues of mutual concern. Through these efforts, the United States can advance its strategic objectives while also supporting the security and development goals of its partner nations.

Learn from partners

The United States can also gain insights from partner nations, as some countries may excel in areas where the US faces challenges. As one participant noted, "I would argue that Jamaica is possibly better than we are when it comes to gender equality in the workplace. Just my observation, which was kind of surprising because, in the United States, we tend to think we're the best at everything."⁵⁸

Demonstrate through showcase

In the future, the United States could demonstrate its values and principles through tangible examples. To promote women's participation, for instance, the United States could spotlight real-life female military personnel who excel in various roles, such as being a mother, a soldier, and a pilot. By showcasing these examples, the United States can inspire women in partner nations and demonstrate their potential as individuals.

US accountability

The United States should enhance accountability for its decision-making processes when engaging with partner nations. Establishing long-term goals, conducting annual reassessments of plans, and closely monitoring program direction could

⁵⁷ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

⁵⁸ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

aid the United States in making informed decisions in the future. Additionally, the United States must exercise greater caution when providing training to foreign militaries. It should carefully consider what content to teach, who should receive training, how training should be conducted, and what outcomes align with US interests. As one respondent aptly put it, “When you train a foreign military, we have to pay attention to what we’re training on, what are the effects, what are the outcomes that we’re trying to accomplish, and make sure that we don’t get stagnant in our training.”⁵⁹

Challenges arise when the United States provides equipment to partner nations that they are not yet capable of managing. For instance, in 2017, the United States granted Ethiopia the C-130 aircraft. However, Ethiopia lacked trained personnel to operate and maintain the aircraft to US standards until the United States conducted training sessions. While air mobility is crucial for Ethiopia’s peacekeeping efforts, this delay and the country’s lack of proficiency with long-range equipment hindered its ability to achieve self-sustaining command-and-control capabilities.

When the United States provides a product to a partner nation at a higher classification level, it bears the responsibility to ensure that the partner nation securely and effectively utilizes the product. However, regular monitoring of this usage often falls short. Statements such as “We give them something that is at a higher classification level, we have a responsibility to ensure that is protected. I don’t think we do that,” and “It’s very difficult, and it’s also very important” confirm the necessity of this accountability.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the United States must exercise caution to prevent the empowerment of individuals who may misuse their authority. Empowering the wrong individuals can lead to exploitation and abuse. As one participant warned, “If you empower them too much, it can be abused. . . . If you don’t manage misinformation and just go silent, then you’re losing the war, you’re losing the struggle for your people, for public support. So, we have to be careful, because that could turn into obviously how to manipulate people in a nefarious way.”⁶¹

Efforts by the United States to more accurately discern partner nations’ needs would streamline the decision-making process and enable a clearer understanding of the support the United States can provide. Numerous uncertainties persist, underscoring the need to address these gaps. As echoed by the previous participant, “I can’t even say what exactly they need yet. Those requirements are still being flushed out.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

⁶⁰ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

⁶¹ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

⁶² Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

Educating security cooperation officers and local employees

The data reveals a recurring turnover among US security cooperation personnel in partner nations, disrupting the consistency and coherence of security cooperation efforts. As an interviewee witnessed, “The majority of the folks we have, we have a pretty constant turnover here.”⁶³ New US personnel often encounter a learning curve as they familiarize themselves with their roles, leading them to rely heavily on local employees who possess extensive experience and knowledge regarding RDFP and IMET activities, including course offerings and candidate information.

To enhance the continuity of security cooperation efforts, regular job training for US personnel would be beneficial, enabling them to better understand their tasks, anticipate challenges, and achieve objectives effectively. While the United States lacks direct control over candidate selection, consistent communication of US preferences by personnel often prompts partner nations to make adjustments. For instance, US efforts to recruit more female candidates in Mexico raised awareness among Mexican military leadership about the importance of gender diversity. The US ODC in Mexico actively monitors alumni promotions and career advancements to assess Mexico’s utilization of RDFP alumni in alignment with national objectives.

Tracking and maintaining detailed records of alumni placements upon their return to their respective countries can provide valuable insights for ongoing program evaluation. Increased reliance on local employees, coupled with robust tracking mechanisms, can contribute to the long-term assessment and enhancement of RDFP and IMET activities.

Mandatory years of required service after RDFP and IMET

Not all partner nation militaries mandate a specified period of service upon completion of educational opportunities. Some candidates opt to pursue higher-paying positions in the private sector after benefiting from their education. To address this issue, the officio should consider implementing a requirement for RDFP and IMET candidates to commit to a certain number of additional years of service upon program completion. As one personnel suggested, “Put a system in place where they are legally obligated to serve an additional xx number of years, and if they don’t do that, then we just cut it out . . . everything we do in the end, let’s be honest, it’s about us, how does this help us. . . . Make sure that we get back what we want.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Military, Georgia, interview with the author.

⁶⁴ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

Patience needed for the United States

The United States must exercise patience when expecting ROI, particularly long-term ROI, from RDFP and IMET activities. Long-term returns often manifest as intangible benefits and necessitate a considerable time frame to become apparent. The factors contributing to long-term ROI are frequently subtle and not immediately discernible. Encouraging partner nations to embrace different values and principles is a gradual process. Many partner nations, for instance, are gradually moving towards adopting US perspectives on gender equality and equitable treatment. Although progress may seem slow from the US standpoint, incremental improvements are occurring. As one respondent astutely noted, “For someone . . . all of a sudden they have to change their whole way of looking at people . . . you can’t expect somebody to just accept . . . when they haven’t for the rest of their previous 40 or 50 years of their life. We just need some patience. We’re not very patient.”⁶⁵ Recognizing the time required for mind-set shifts, the United States should adopt a long-term outlook and afford partner nations ample time to evolve their perspectives and practices.

Creating a win-win situation

The desires of the United States and partner nations often align. While the United States seeks to assess the effectiveness and ROI of RDFP and IMET activities, partner nations also prioritize their own ROI, seeking to understand the benefits derived from their partnership with the United States and participation in US education and training activities. For instance, when the United States suspended security cooperation funding following Thailand’s coup d’état in 2014, Thailand allocated its national resources to send professionals for US education and training. When foreign professionals study in the United States, they not only enhance their résumés but also deepen their knowledge of military-related subjects. Partner nations’ investment of their national funds in educating their professionals underscores their focus on ROI. In essence, partner nations aim to cultivate a new knowledge base and foster connections with the United States. As one participant observed, “I think their goal is also the relationship piece.”⁶⁶

Therefore, the United States should tailor RDFP and IMET education and training activities to establish a mutually beneficial scenario. While partner nations forge partnerships and absorb US advanced technology and operational methods, the United

⁶⁵ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

⁶⁶ Military, Thailand, interview with the author.

States can reciprocate by learning from partner nations' best practices. As one respondent highlighted, "They're learning from us and we're learning from them, so it's good."⁶⁷

Conclusion

American values of democracy, human rights, and civilian control over the military are fundamental pillars of US security policy. Across the Indo-Pacific region, many nations understand that engaging in security cooperation with the United States entails embracing these values and adhering to US expectations regarding civil-military relations. However, not all nations in the Indo-Pacific readily embrace these values, and some "have accepted this conditionally, albeit sometimes begrudgingly."⁶⁸ In this context, RDFP and IMET activities serve as forms of soft power that can help address hesitations and reluctance by imparting fundamental concepts that define the US approach and fostering common ground.

Geopolitical and geoeconomic uncertainties persist in the Indo-Pacific region, underscoring the importance of robust networks among allies and partners for a successful long-term Indo-Pacific strategy. Allies and partners who share common values can play a pivotal role in mitigating differences during conflicts and promoting regional security and stability aligned with US interests. For instance, nations like South Korea, Japan, or the Philippines have the potential to influence non-aligned countries such as Indonesia, nudging them closer to the United States and bolstering support for US values and objectives in the region.

Quantifying the ROIs of security cooperation efforts poses significant challenges due to their inherently immeasurable nature. However, the quality of these returns can be assessed by evaluating the extent to which partner nations align with US strategic objectives. ROIs can manifest in both short-term and long-term outcomes. Short-term returns are often more tangible and observable within a relatively brief timeframe, whereas long-term returns are typically intangible and may require decades to fully materialize.

Despite the challenges in measuring the return on investment (ROI) of RDFP and IMET activities, these educational and training initiatives serve as highly effective strategic tools for the United States in strengthening alliances and partnerships. They offer invaluable opportunities to cultivate personal and professional relationships, which are instrumental in fostering cooperation and alignment with US objectives. Additionally, shared understanding of doctrines, military culture,

⁶⁷ Civilian, Mexico, interview with the author.

⁶⁸ Desmond Walton, "Security Cooperation: The Key to Access and Influence in the Asia-Pacific," *Alliance Requirements Roadmap Series* (Washington: CNAS, May 2016), 4, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/>.

national culture, and business practices enhances efficiency and productivity in collaborative efforts. As emphasized by a security cooperation military personnel, “It’s not 100% effective but as far as U.S. objectives, it is one of the most effective and cheapest tool for us to use to promote our values and our doctrine.”⁶⁹ 🌟

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⁶⁹ Military, Colombia, interview with the author.

The Church of the Periphery and the Catholic Pivot to the Indo-Pacific

DR. ENRICO BELTRAMINI

Abstract

Amid an interminable crisis in the Western world, the Roman Catholic Church's pivot to the Indo-Pacific represents an endeavor to uphold a central social role in a rapidly evolving global landscape. This time, however, the Roman Catholic Church does not harbor imperial ambitions to establish worldly peace. Instead, it aligns itself with the impoverished, marginalized, and those adversely affected by Western-driven globalization. The Church's pivot toward the Indo-Pacific transpired during a post-globalization era. In this era, the Indo-Pacific ceases to be a mere remnant of affluent Western nations; it emerges as a space where a philosophical, legal, political, social, and cultural framework for constructing, codifying, comprehending, and experiencing a domain distinct from the West can potentially become predominant. This article will demonstrate how this characterization of the Indo-Pacific could influence the Church's agenda.

The future of the Church is in Asia.

—Pope Francis to the Philippine Cardinal Tagle

The interest in Asia has been an integral aspect of Roman Catholicism's recent history, dating back to the early twentieth century. Anticipating the end of the colonial era, the Roman Catholic Church initiated an extensive endeavor in the 1920s to indigenize the Church in non-European continents. Presently, indigenous bishops oversee local churches worldwide, and non-European bishops lead the universal Church itself. However, Pope Francis' vision of shifting the universal Church's focal point to Asia, as articulated in his discussion with Cardinal Tagle, presents a distinct challenge.

This article explores the convergence of ecclesiastical governance and geopolitics. Catholicism has wielded significant influence in the West for centuries. Nevertheless, the Church's sway in Western societies is waning due to the hypersecularization of these societies and a series of enduring ecclesiastical scandals. The following offers speculation regarding the trajectory of Roman Catholicism in the Indo-Pacific over the next two decades. The demographic prospects of Asia for Catholicism are widely recognized. When coupled with the encroaching hypersecularization that threatens the historical strongholds of the Church in Europe, Asia stands poised to potentially become a preeminent center of Catholicism in the long term. Given the prevalence of Islam in the Middle East and Central Asia,

Asia is synonymous with the Indo-Pacific for Catholicism. Consequently, Pope Francis's pivot to Asia can be more precisely described as a pivot to the Indo-Pacific.¹

In the forthcoming Catholic order, the gravitational center ideally relocates from Western Europe to the Indo-Pacific. This article elucidates the motivations underpinning the Catholic pivot to the Indo-Pacific and the potential impact of the escalating East–West tensions that concern the Indo-Pacific on the strategy of the universal Roman Catholic Church. The core assumptions behind Pope Francis's geopolitical maneuver are twofold: firstly, an acknowledgment of the prevailing conditions of indifference and injustice entrenched in the daily lives of millions, and their potential for seeking a better existence beyond the confines of Western liberal globalization; secondly, a pivot to the Indo-Pacific as a form of resistance to Western hegemony.

While social justice has constituted a cornerstone of the Church since the late nineteenth century, its consolidated role has perpetually aimed to bring both celestial and earthly peace to the world. The aspiration to foster mundane peace, once an imperial objective reminiscent of the Church's role during the Middle Ages, now necessitates a change. This transformation can be encapsulated as a shift “from the center to the periphery.” The ecclesial revolution initiated by Pope Francis remains integral to Catholicism's ongoing evolution. According to the pontiff, the new center of the Church resides within the periphery, making the periphery the Church's permanent *locus theologicus*.² Pope Francis has employed the concept of “periphery” as a metaphor for social, existential, and spiritual marginality since the beginning of his pontificate. The periphery, indeed, represents the place where a beleaguered Church entangled in sexual and financial scandals may find the spiritual resources and vitality needed for self-renewal. By relocating the Church to the margins, the pontiff has also issued a warning to the political and economic core of liberal globalization. Through public declarations and actions, he has underscored his macro-level vision of a central North (or West) and a peripheral South within the context of the prevailing global economic order. Pope Francis has expressed unwavering discomfort with the unchecked and inequitable forces of liberal globalization. Within this framework, he has redefined the center-periphery

¹ Most of today's Catholics do not live in Europe, or in the global North. By 2050, 75 percent of Catholics will live outside the West. Across Asia, Catholicism continues to be a minority faith. However, Asia's total population is so large that it is now home to one in ten Catholics. By 2050, Asia will be home to two in ten Catholics.

² *Locus theologicus* is a Latin term referring to the theological or doctrinal locus, often used in theological discourse to denote a specific point or area within theology where particular beliefs, concepts, or principles are explored and discussed in depth. It serves as a designated focus within theological studies.

dynamic as an economic liberal center juxtaposed with a peripheral religion, one that champions justice and thrives on the peripheries.³

The Church no longer plays a neutral role in mediating peace among conflicting parties. It no longer addresses a broad audience, rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged; instead, the Church aligns itself with the reality of alienation, exclusion, and marginalization, standing against the unjust and conformist powers emanating from the liberal epicenter of global finance.

However, in this paper, I do not portray the Indo-Pacific as a mere residue of affluent Western nations but as a domain where a comprehensive philosophical, legal, political, social, and cultural framework for constructing, codifying, comprehending, and experiencing a realm distinct from the West could potentially become dominant. The Indo-Pacific is assuming the role of a destined space where a clash between the West and East may unfold. I do not claim that an actual West-East clash—whether military, economic, or political—will occur in the Indo-Pacific. However, I explore this scenario because it remains a possibility and serves as a heuristic tool for understanding the intricacies of the Church's pivot to the Indo-Pacific

The central event underlying the escalating competition between the two is the so-called “decline of the West and rise of the East,” a term subject to various interpretations. In simplified terms, it signifies the waning global power of the West and the ascent of China as the new global power center. An Asian century appears poised to succeed an American century, and the Indo-Pacific serves as the geopolitical arena where this expression undergoes scrutiny.⁴ The mounting confrontations between the East and the West in the Indo-Pacific may compel the Church to reevaluate its orientation toward the world's peripheries and its prioritization of justice over peace.

From a theological perspective, peace and justice, if viewed in absolute terms, are not inherent to this world. One might argue that they are defining attributes

³ The pope has frequently linked the peripheries to globalization. For example, Pope Francis mentioned the “globalization of indifference” in “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2019” (press release, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, 29 September 2019), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

⁴ For a counternarrative, see Michael R. Auslin, *The End of the Asian Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). The pontiff himself is framing the current East-West confrontation in conflictual terms. Pope Francis's reference to the Third World War, delivered through an address at Redipuglia during a visit to Italy's largest military cemetery on 13 September 2014, reads as follows: “Even today, after the second failure of another world war, perhaps one can speak of a third war, one fought piecemeal, with crimes, massacres, destruction.” Quoted in “Pope Francis Warns on ‘Piecemeal World War III,’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 September 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/>.

of the divine essence. What humanity can achieve in this world is an approximation of either peace or justice, but not both simultaneously.

Regarding terminology, *globalization* denotes the process of global economic integration, commencing in the 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s with the reintegration of Russia and China into the world economy, culminating in the creation of the European single market in 1992. *Geopolitical* refers to the impact of geography, both human and physical, on politics and international relations. *Periphery* is a term inspired by Cardinal Bergoglio's pre-election statement, urging the Church to venture beyond its boundaries and reach the peripheries, not solely in geographical terms but also in existential peripheries. This article incorporates *geopolitical* to encompass both the ecclesial and geopolitical dimensions of the periphery. Alternative expressions of the same concept include "call to go to the periphery," "Church of the periphery," "orientation toward the periphery," "periphery orientation," and "periphery model."

The West is a geopolitical entity coined after World War II, encompassing the United States and its European and Asian allies. Alternatively, the West predominantly signifies specific institutions and values: the social contract, private property, open markets, diversity, pluralism, and freedom of opinion. The terms *hegemonic West* and *East* require clarification. In a preliminary sense, the former signifies a West perceived as the world's center of gravity, framed by Western modes of thought. *The East* can be broadly defined, encompassing a vast region spanning the Indian subcontinent in the South and Asia in the East, with the Indo-Pacific component as its hegemonic locus. It represents a distinct political, legal, cultural, and intellectual reality, autonomous from and an alternative to the West, aspiring to become the principal political, economic, military, and cultural force in shaping the global order.

From the Center to the Periphery

The crisis affecting the spiritual and political authority of the Church necessitates a reconsideration of Catholicism's role in the contemporary world. With diminished political influence and spiritual sway, the Church faces the risk of losing its societal role. While it can no longer strive to bring about world peace, it can, however, work toward reducing injustices. To achieve this, a new Church must replace the old one. Pope Francis has emphasized the need for the Church to shift its perspective from the center to the peripheries, recognizing that viewing reality from the periphery offers a different and more insightful vantage point. As Pope Francis puts

it, “You see reality better from the periphery than from the center.”⁵ He contends that Europe, as viewed from Madrid in the sixteenth century, was one perspective, but when Magellan reached the end of the American continent, he saw Europe from a fresh vantage point, leading to a different understanding. This shift in perspective holds the potential for significant implications across multiple levels, encompassing both pastoral and theological considerations.

The theological engagement of the West has played a pivotal role in shaping the concerns, aspirations, and interests of Catholicism throughout the twentieth century. Theologians have engaged with the West from both the center, represented by Rome and Western Catholicism, and the fringes of Catholicism. Western theologians have been instrumental in laying the foundations of Vatican Council II and transforming the relationship between Catholicism and modernity from one of rejection to critical acceptance. However, the reception of the council’s theological tenets has primarily been an internal Western affair. In recent decades, engagement from the center has increasingly intertwined with engagement from the margins. Liberation theology and Asian theologies, while addressing the local realities of Latin America and Asia, have inevitably entered into dialogues with the West and its principal economic and social institutions, including capitalism, colonialism, and globalization.⁶ Non-Western theologians have not only challenged the established political and social conditions of the West-dominated world but also the prevailing categories of thought, both theological and nontheological, that marginalize the voices of non-Western populations.

Nevertheless, the theological dimension represents only one facet of Bergoglio’s shift, and it alone is insufficient to fully encapsulate the vision of the Argentinian pope. Pope Francis has undeniably imparted a missionary impetus to the Church. The recently released Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*, restructures the Roman Curia to better serve local churches and the evangelization mission.⁷ The constitution is the result of extensive collaborative efforts spanning nine years and draws inspiration from pre-conclave meetings in

⁵ Pope Francis’ 10 March 2015 interview was released to *La Cárcova News*, a popular magazine produced in an Argentine *villa miseria*, or shantytown. “Mensaje del Papa Francisco para la inauguración de la parroquia San Juan Bosco,” *La Cárcova*, 10 March 2015, <https://web.archive.org/>.

⁶ *Liberation theologies* constitute a theological stream that prioritizes liberation from social, political, and economic forms of oppression. Asian theologies predominantly operate within a contextual framework, deriving theological reflection from the social environment rather than doctrine.

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution of the Roman Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/>. A public statement explained that “With the coming into force of this Apostolic Constitution, the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* is fully abrogated and replaced, and the reform of the Roman Curia is thus completed.”

2013. “Evangelizing presupposes a desire in the church to come out of herself,” Cardinal Bergoglio had asserted to the cardinals shortly before his election. “The church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all forms of misery.”⁸ Consequently, *periphery* signifies the interplay between geographical and existential realms and also encompasses the Church’s governance, extending beyond mere diplomacy. *Government* denotes an ecclesiastical statecraft, the art of conducting the Church’s affairs. This form of governance should be understood in terms of a sacramental orientation that encompasses both human and providential elements.

This shift in the Church’s missionary orientation is unsurprising, given the harm caused by a self-centered ecclesiastical attitude in recent decades. Members of the Church’s governance, both at central and peripheral levels, have regrettably and eventually criminally resisted acknowledging the end of Christendom and the advantages of a Church conceived as self-referential and self-indulgent. By prioritizing the reform of the Church and redirecting it away from Rome, the Roman Curia, and the broader “center” of Catholicism, Pope Francis seeks to rescue the Church from its own shortcomings and provide it with a renewed purpose.⁹ Pope Francis ardently advocates for a Church that is not self-referential.

There is a tension between the center and the periphery. We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-referential: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. It’s true that accidents can happen when you go out into the street, as can happen to any man or woman. But if the Church remains closed onto itself, self-referential, it grows old. Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first.¹⁰

The Church is called to shift away from its center and steer clear of what Pope Francis has characterized as a “spiritual disease.” A self-centered Church is, in essence, an ailing Church. Pope Bergoglio’s Church embodies peripherality in both

⁸ Jimmy Akin, “The 4-Minute Speech That Got Pope Francis Elected?,” *Catholic Answers*, 23 April 2013, <https://www.catholic.com/>.

⁹ Francis wants to enhance the potential of episcopal conferences, that is, the local (national and transnational) conferences of bishops, while reducing the power of the Curia.

¹⁰ Andrea Tornielli, “Tentazione sudamericana per il primo Papa extraeuropeo,” interview with Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, *La Stampa*, 2 March 2013, <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/>.

a Christological sense and regarding “new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ.”¹¹

Of course, the concept of *periphery* allows for various interpretations. It carries a strong ecclesial connotation: the Church must rejuvenate itself at the ecclesial fringes. As scholar Valentina Napolitano articulates, “a worldwide renewal of Catholicism can be engendered only by placing people who are marginal at the evangelical centre of the Church and by curbing the self-referentiality and thirst for power of the Roman Curia.”¹² However, this concept also conveys a geopolitical significance: the Church must move from the central North (or West) and reposition itself in the peripheral South. Pope Francis’s pivot to the peripheral South constitutes a profound shift in Catholicism’s focus and aims to lay the groundwork for the Church’s future. Francis explicitly stated this in his discourse to the Council of Europe on 25 November 2014: “Creativity, ingenuity and the capacity to rise above and to go beyond her own limits belong to the European soul.”¹³ Europe is summoned to transcend itself and extend beyond its own boundaries, in harmony with its heritage and fundamental instincts. However, the pope takes a less optimistic view when assessing the current state of Europe. Consistent with his approach, where “time is greater than space,” he characterizes contemporary Europe as being “more concerned with preserving and dominating spaces than with generating processes of inclusion and change.”¹⁴ The periphery orientation not only challenges

¹¹ Pope Francis, “*Evangeli Gaudium*” (apostolic exhortation, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, 24 November 2013), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

¹² Valentina Napolitano has framed the “globalization of indifference” in an ecclesial context. See “‘The Globalization of Indifference’: On Pope Francis, Migration and Global Acedia,” in *Religion and Morality of the Market*, eds. Daromir Rudnycky and Filippo Osella (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 263–84.

¹³ Pope Francis, “Address to the European Parliament” (speech, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Strasbourg, France, 25 November 2014), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, “Address to the European Parliament.” The quote “time is greater than space” is from Pope Francis, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*” (bulletin, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, 19 March 2016), <https://press.vatican.va/>. By his own admission, Pope Francis’ ambition is limited to initiate historical process. “God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history,” he clarified. “This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting.” See Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: Interview with Pope Francis,” *America the Jesuit Review*, 30 September 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/>. A more evolved version of the same concept can be found in paragraph 3 of the apostolic exhortation on love in the family, *Amoris Laetitia*: “Since ‘time is greater than space,’ I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. John 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does.”

the notion of a European-centric Church but also of a Church rooted in European origins. Europe is no longer the Church's primary point of reference.

The pontiff's interest distinctly extends beyond the confines of the West, evident in his travels to countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Central African Republic. The center-periphery relationship is applicable at both global and local levels, as both the center and periphery of the world possess their own internal center-periphery structures. Pope Francis visited nations grappling with famine, civil conflict, and human rights violations. In his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis indirectly elucidates his perspective: "I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others. Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all."¹⁵ Thus, the pontiff regards himself as the principal pastor of "a Church without frontiers," a Church that perceives itself as a mother to all, rather than limited to the West. Two significant documents from the pontificate underpin this vision: *Laudato Si*, an encyclical addressing ecological concerns and resistance to the prevailing technological paradigm, and the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (All Brothers), which emphasizes interreligious dialogue.¹⁶

According to the pontiff, the revitalization of the Church hinges on holiness and mission, which signify contemplation and evangelization. Notably, this focus does not revolve around the administration of the Vatican's finances or cozying up to worldly powers.¹⁷ The pontiff's intention is to position justice, and by extension, those who are marginalized, at the core of an internal renewal within the Church. Pope Francis indeed portrays this relationship in ecclesial terms, bridging the gap between the geographical and existential margins of the Church and the historical centrality of Rome's Catholic Curia.

In a recent article, Pasquale Ferrara, who possesses both scholarly and diplomatic backgrounds, delves into Bergoglio's perspective on the universal Church in the context of globalization. Ferrara suggests, "An alternative way to analyze the role of religions consists in considering them as agencies defending the perspective of a universal community, putting into question the *national* political boundaries and

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, "Laudato Si, Encyclical Letter of Care for Our Common Home" (letter, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 24 May 2015), <https://www.vatican.va/>; and Pope Francis, "Fratelli Tutti, Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship" (letter, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Assisi, 3 October 2020), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, "Gaudete et Exsultate" (apostolic exhortation, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 19 March 2018), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

contesting the *existing* global order.”¹⁸ (original emphasis) In his view, Pope Francis envisions a third way that transcends contemporary sovereignties and liberal economic globalization. The pontiff has frequently expressed concerns about conceiving the globalization process as a “sphere,” representing a standardization process that seeks to impose a single (i.e., Western, North American) worldview—a homogeneous vision for society, economics, politics, and culture. In contrast, he advocates for the polyhedron, a multi-sided geometric figure that better preserves multicultural richness. As Pope Francis reflects, “Our image of globalization should not be the sphere,” Pope Francis reflects, “but the polyhedron. It expresses how unity is created while preserving the identities of the peoples, the persons, of the cultures.”¹⁹ Ferrara outlines the idea of the Church that Pope Francis envisions—a Church that is simultaneously universal and peripheral to the Western hegemonic global order. The alignment between the spiritual and political interests of certain Christian blocs, such as the Russian stream of Orthodoxy, serves, at least theoretically, to support this ecumenical strategy of religious containment or even resistance to global powers. Consequently, Pope Francis’s antiglobalization spirit and his pivot of Catholicism toward the peripheral South are two sides of the same strategic coin.

The Church’s borders with Russia and China have become akin to a geopolitical event horizon, and their proximity will shape the future of Catholicism. This marks a significant geopolitical shift. Pope Francis has achieved diplomatic results with Russia and China that eluded his predecessors. While President Boris Yeltsin once invited John Paul to visit Moscow, this invitation was later retracted due to the opposition of Alexius II, the predecessor of the current Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill I. In stark contrast, Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill famously embraced and kissed in February 2016, followed by a joint declaration.²⁰ Then there’s the Chinese chapter: during the 27 years of Wojtyła’s reign, relations with Beijing worsened, marked by the illegitimate ordination of several bishops by the Chinese Patriotic Church (an arm of the regime). However, under Pope Francis, a 2018 agreement for the appointment of bishops was signed between the Holy See and the Chinese

¹⁸ Pasquale Ferrara, “The Concept of Periphery in Pope Francis’ Discourse: A Religious Alternative to Globalization?” *Religions* 6, no. 1 (2015), 42, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus” (address, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 24 October 2016, <https://www.vatican.va/>). The quote originated during a question-and-answer session.

²⁰ Meeting of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill, “Signing of the Joint Declaration,” José Martí International Airport, Havana, Cuba, 12 February 2016.

government.²¹ This agreement appeared to chart a path toward future unity for China's Catholics, who had previously been divided into a state-sanctioned hierarchy and an underground church led by Rome-approved bishops.²²

Church of Periphery and West–East Clash

Pope Francis's periphery model encompasses both ecclesial and geopolitical aspects, primarily as a form of resistance to Western globalism and a pivot toward the Indo-Pacific. The pontiff holds a special affinity for certain places and people. When questioned about the possibility of being the first pope to visit Russia and China, Francis pointed to his heart and remarked, "China and Russia, I have them here. Pray."²³ Notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin is second only to Angela Merkel in the number of visits to the Vatican since 2013. While the pope's extensive *Ostpolitik* and his unique rapport with Putin can be understood within ecumenical contexts, they also underscore the cultural and even visceral gap that separates Pope Francis from the Western world. The pontiff not only departs from the Eurocentric perspective of his immediate predecessors but also maintains a more complex relationship with the other pole of the West, North America.²⁴

Some commentators have observed that the differing treatment Francis has reserved for Putin and Donald Trump reveals telling distinctions: during their 2013 meeting in Rome, Putin received praise for his military intervention in Syria, framed as a peace mission. Moreover, in their 2015 meeting, the pope refrained from blaming Putin for the violence in Ukraine. Trump, on the other hand, faced less favorable treatment; he was labeled as "not Christian" during a conversation with the press on the papal aircraft in 2016.²⁵ The conflict in Ukraine has momentarily shifted Pope Francis's ambitions away from Russia and refocused them on the Indo-Pacific.

²¹ One could argue that the Church's relationship with China highlights the status of Catholics in the Indo-Pacific: a notable religious minority devoid of political influence and occasionally subject to persecution.

²² The Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China regarding the appointment of Bishops, Beijing, 22 September 2018. In 2020, the parts agreed to prolong the term for another two years through 22 October 2022.

²³ Doug Stanglin, "Pope, Patriarch Meet in Cuba Nearly 1,000 years After Split," *USA Today*, 12 February 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/>.

²⁴ The literature on the difficult relationship between Pope Francis and North American Catholicism, including sharply expressed criticisms of Pope Francis by certain contemporary conservative Catholics—i.e., R. R. Reno and George Weigel—as well as defenses by liberal Catholics, including Massimo Faggioli and Austen Ivereigh, is extensive. Among the scholarly works focusing on the subject, see James J. Bacik, *Pope Francis and His Critics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021).

²⁵ The remark reads: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian." See Lindsey Bever, "Pope Francis—not naming names—makes appeal 'not to create walls, but to build bridges'," *Washington Post*, 18 February 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific may not merely be a repository for the injustices of globalization. It could instead be the fertile ground for a philosophical, legal, political, social, and cultural category that allows for the construction, codification, understanding, and experience of a realm or reality distinct from the West to gain prominence. Within the societies of the Indo-Pacific, marginalization and social disparities may exist and even intensify over time, but the prevailing discourse centers on the call for the emancipation of Asian nations from Western tutelage. What was once a potential East–West tension has become a daily reality for millions of people. The prospect of a local or even regional conflict is contemplated.

This emerging reality of potential conflict between the West and the East impacts Pope Francis's vision of the Church's social role as an advocate for the poor and disadvantaged in at least two ways. Firstly, it complicates Pope Francis's plan by altering the pivot's meaning and politicizing it. It is one thing to move the Church into the land of those marginalized by Western globalization, and another to enter a realm suffused with self-assertiveness and aspirations of global rule. In the Indo-Pacific, emerging powers, unlike the pope, are actively engaged in building armies, inciting conflicts, opening new oil routes, and forming trade agreements that exclude affluent economies. The game is open, and the outcome remains uncertain. As of now, neither the West nor the East appears to be winning this game. A new order, characterized by two competitive blocs of nations vying for global dominance, sheds light on the limitations of the concept of a hegemonic West and the ambiguities of the current situation. It also underscores the extent to which the Russian invasion has disrupted established patterns and made the coordinates of the recent past fragile. The pope's pivot to the Indo-Pacific is no longer devoid of political implications; it is and will continue to be reframed in political terms, with the pope's actions being closely monitored and scrutinized. He will face the choice of either reevaluating his position concerning the old continent, an option that seems foreign to Francis's sensibilities and interests or persisting in his pivot toward the East. However, the war in Ukraine has cast an unwanted spotlight on Pope Francis's Russian connections, raising concerns among Catholics in America and Europe. How can the pope align himself with the autocratic regimes of Russia and the Indo-Pacific while still expecting to be perceived as the religious leader of Western Catholics? The pontiff's room for maneuver has narrowed precisely at a time when the Church appears ready to extend beyond the confines of the Western world, and a clash of civilizations looms, entrapping the pope between two opposing blocs.

The potential clash between the West and East poses a profound challenge to Pope Francis's pivot toward the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the inherent difficulty of striking a delicate balance between real-world diplomacy and the religious

foundation. This situation underscores a second consequence: it redirects the Church's focus toward diplomacy, often overshadowing the theme of the periphery in favor of peace. More specifically, it *accentuates* the ongoing trend of conditioning the periphery orientation to meet the requirements of Vatican diplomacy. Popes are not merely spiritual leaders for over a billion Catholics worldwide; they also serve as diplomats.

The Vatican maintains its own seasoned diplomatic corps, dispersed among Nunciatures, Legations, and traveling Ambassadors. Through this diplomatic corps, the Church oversees Agreements between Church and State worldwide—14 in Africa, 12 in Latin America, 11 in Asia, and 25 in Europe—aimed at facilitating the spread of the Gospel.

As the Vatican City State, the Catholic Church holds a permanent Observer status at the United Nations (UN), a privilege unique among world religions. This status allows active participation in UN Conferences and enables influence over adopted final positions. The Holy See's diplomatic efforts underwent a transformation with the Second Vatican Council. Previously, Vatican diplomacy primarily safeguarded the Catholic Church's freedom within states, often securing privileged conditions for Catholics. However, under Pope Paul VI's leadership, the Church shifted towards advocating religious freedom for all individuals, transcending denominational boundaries.

Diplomacy, in certain instances, carries political ramifications. A notable example is the Helsinki Conference of July–August 1975, where Cardinal Casaroli and Mons. Achille Silvestrini successfully advocated for the affirmation of religious freedom as a cornerstone of human rights. The Helsinki Conference, initially aimed at thawing relations between the two blocs, culminated in a Declaration outlining principles for inter-state relations. This Declaration, included in a Final Act, established a decalogue of international politics. Of significance is the Sixth Commandment: “Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.” This doctrinal and diplomatic achievement, spearheaded by Casaroli and Silvestrini under Pope Paul VI's guidance, played a pivotal role in legitimizing Pope John Paul II's support for Solidarnosc. Despite Eastern countries' initial dismissal of the document's impact, the so-called decalogue ultimately contributed to the erosion of their systems from within.

Back to Pope Francis: in numerous instances, his call to embrace the periphery has clashed with the demands of diplomacy. This diplomatic alignment came at a cost: the Francis-Kirill joint declaration, signed one year after the 2014 Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the de facto annexation of Donbass and Crimea, omitted any clear support for Ukraine. A similar cost was incurred regarding China, with Pope Francis refraining from expressing clear support for the Hong Kong

protesters or condemning China's human rights violations. Even when Pope Francis mentioned the persecuted Uighur population in passing, the Chinese foreign ministry swiftly dismissed his criticism as groundless.²⁶ And that was it. Many decades ago, the late theologian José Complin cautioned that “even today, popes assign themselves this primordial mission of being the world's peacemakers, an imperial role.”²⁷ As one of the prominent advocates of liberation theology in Brazil, Complin further asserted, “the popes have learned that their role is primarily political, as promoters of the peace and unity of the human race.”²⁸ Consequently, the Church faces a dilemma: prioritize the call to existential and geographic marginalities or the pursuit of peace.²⁹

The unresolved relationship between marginality and diplomacy becomes evident during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Ukraine epitomizes the periphery, hosting a dire humanitarian crisis with millions in need, including women, children, and countless civilian casualties. Yet, the instinct to go to Ukraine to deliver the Gospel to those in need collided with diplomatic considerations. Pope Francis expressed a willingness to do anything to initiate negotiations to end the war, but physically going to Ukraine could be construed as taking sides against Putin's enemies, undermining the Holy See's mediation efforts. Consequently, the Catholic Church's

²⁶ Pope Francis' remark reads: “I think often of persecuted peoples: the Rohingya, the poor Uighurs, the Yazidi.” See Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), xxx. For the Chinese foreign minister's statement, see “China says pope's remarks about 'persecuted' Uighurs are groundless,” *Reuters*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

²⁷ José Complin, “Experiences of Crisis in the History of Christianity,” *Concilium* 41, no. 3 (2005), 103.

²⁸ Complin, “Experiences of Crisis in the History of Christianity,” 103.

²⁹ More examples could be added. The joint resolution frustrated and disappointed Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (in communion with the Roman Catholic Church), who said he felt “betrayed by the Vatican” over the declaration's stance regarding Ukraine. At the core of his frustration was the word “conflict,” rather a stronger characterization of the war as a foreign aggression of a neighboring state. Shevchuk charged that the Russian Patriarch “openly supports Russian aggression against Ukraine.” In return, Kirill denounced the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on various occasions as “divisive.” The pope took the side of Kirill. When the pope received a delegation from the patriarch of Moscow in 2018, he cast such frustration and disappointment in terms of disobedience and put the Ukrainian Greek Catholics to silence. In other words, the realpolitik of ecumenical dialogue must be protected at any cost. Here is the whole remark: “In Moscow—in Russia —there is only one Patriarchate: yours. We will not have another. And when some Catholic faithful, be they lay people, priests or bishops, take up the banner of ‘Uniatism’ which no longer functions, which is over, for me it is also painful. The Churches that are united with Rome must be respected, but ‘Uniatism’ as a road to unity does not work today. Instead, it gives me comfort when I find this: the outstretched hand, the fraternal embrace, thinking together, and walking. Ecumenism is accomplished by walking. Let us walk.” See Agence France-Press, “Ukrainian Greek Catholics ‘betrayed’ by pope-patriarch meeting,” *Hurryyet Daily News*, 14 February 2016, <https://www.hurryyetedailynews.com/>; “Patriarch of Moscow thanks Vatican for ‘balanced position on the crisis in Ukraine,’” *Asia News*, 2 April 2015, <https://www.asianews.it/>; Pope Francis, “Address to the Delegation of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow” (address, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 30 May 2018), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

official position was to condemn the war in Ukraine without explicitly naming the aggressor, emphasizing the aggressor's responsibilities while avoiding alignment with the West.³⁰ Ultimately, the Church refrained from providing spiritual solace to the people of Ukraine, as diplomatic efforts took precedence.

In conclusion, the Church finds itself entangled in this monumental global shift while on a pilgrimage toward new ecclesial and geopolitical horizons. Pope Francis faces a pivotal choice: rejecting the clash of civilizations and adhering to his call to the periphery, or realistically accepting the clash and working to address it. As Pope Francis once argued, the hermeneutical key to this papacy is that “reality is greater than ideas,” meaning that the evolving situation will compel (or is already compelling) the pontiff to acknowledge the new reality.³¹ This change may not necessarily affect the ecclesial dimension of the exodus but will undoubtedly create tensions between the ecclesial and geopolitical dimensions. In fact, the ecclesial periphery no longer neatly aligns with the peripheral South. It is highly probable that a new periphery will emerge at the juncture between the two blocs. The escalating tensions in various regions worldwide, especially in the Indo-Pacific—such as those along the India-China frontier, between China and Taiwan, and between China and the Philippines—indicate that war, rather than justice, is becoming increasingly prominent. Regarding the conflict in Ukraine, Pope Francis endeavored to reassess the doctrine of Just War, rooted in the teachings of Augustine.³² The West–East clash in the Indo-Pacific will likely compel the Church to prioritize peace over justice, a role it has upheld since the fall of the Roman Empire. In this context, the Church will be called upon to prevent the outbreak of global and nuclear wars and make invaluable contributions to world peace. Precisely at a time when a clash of civilizations is unfolding, the pope may find himself urged to turn his attention back to Rome and the Curia's diplomatic expertise. The divergences between the periphery model and Vatican diplomacy are poised to expand. 🌟

³⁰ To his credit, Pope Francis followed a well-established tradition in Vatican diplomacy. John Paul II, who condemned the 2003 war in Iraq, never directly mentioned the United States and its allies in his critiques. A comprehensive resume of the trajectory of Pope Francis' public reaction to the Russia-Ukraine war, from the initial hesitations to the firmer statements, found in Massimo Faggioli, “Putin's War and Pope Francis,” *Commonweal*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/>.

³¹ Pope Francis, “Address at the Meeting with Young People” (address, Sports field of Santo Tomás University, Manila, 18 January 2015), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 19–20 January 2015, 7.

³² In an interview with the Argentinian news station *Télam* in June 2022, Pope Francis said, “I believe it is time to rethink the concept of a ‘just war.’” *Télam*, “Papa Francisco ‘De la crisis no se sale solo. Se sale arriesgando y tomando al otro de la mano,’” YouTube, 20 June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

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Countering China's Malign Influence in Southeast Asia

A Revised Strategy for the United States

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Abstract

In reorienting its foreign policy to counter China, the United States must grasp China's ambitions deeply. Understanding the historical roots and driving forces behind Chinese actions is vital. Previous research analyzed the global ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its strategic means to realize them, with a focus on Southeast Asia. It highlighted the CCP's pursuit of hegemony and its use of malign influence, avoiding actions that might provoke a US military response. This second installment of research proposes a revised US strategy, emphasizing partnerships in Southeast Asia to limit China's ability to act against US interests. Relevant to foreign relations experts and military operations, this research advocates for shaping the regional environment to constrain China's power.

Drawing from the assessment of Chinese strategy in Southeast Asia within the context of a bid for global hegemony, this second installment of the research presents a course of action to address and deter Chinese Communist Party (CCP) actions in Southeast Asia that impede US strategic objectives. A phased strategy to address the threat is detailed, responding to the previously discussed challenge.

Concept of Response

The United States needs to refine its strategy vis-à-vis the CCP in Southeast Asia. President Joe Biden's approach to the CCP can be summarized in three words, "invest, align, compete." These objectives are then elaborated on in the US *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. The current strategy is not terminally flawed. Recent developments in Southeast Asia, such as the increased access to basing in the Philippines via the expansion of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), indicate positive progress in the region. However, more must be done to fill the gaps that exist in the current US strategy. Significant areas that require attention are solidifying a US narrative backed by conviction, replacing a reactive approach to partners and allies with a proactive one, and increasing the effectiveness against

irregular warfare (IW) threats. Much of the recommended strategy adjustment resides in the “how” of the strategy and the causal logic generated by the “why.” In strategic planning terms, this strategy’s focus centers on better fusing ways and means to achieve the desired ends.

The desired end state is a Southeast Asia that is free and not dominated or coerced by CCP influence. This objective will enable the US to achieve its strategic goals in the region. These include regional stability, security, and the preservation of the rules-based international order. One major objective of this strategy is to ensure Taiwan is not coerced or forcefully compelled to reunify with mainland China. As noted in the strategic estimate, this act would destabilize the region and severely impede US strategic objectives. The CCP strategy for success in Taiwan’s reunification hinges on Southeast Asia, making the region pivotal to this objective.

The theory of success for the strategy can be summarized in the phrase, “containment through cooperation.” Unfortunately, the term containment has become synonymous with negative doctrine, but this does not need to be true. Here, containment will focus on limiting the CCP’s military and coercive options through collective opposition or resistance in the region. The goal is not to constrain military or economic growth but rather constrain CCP decision calculus on how they employ their instruments of national power in the region. This strategy will seek to do this primarily through deepening partnerships and alliances in the region, which is already a mainstay of the US Indo-Pacific policy. It seeks to elevate the roles of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and other regional actors to assume regional leadership roles, allowing the United States to take on an enabling role. This deemphasizes a direct clash between China and the US in the region and forces the CCP to account for regional actors with an emboldened voice. Regional relationships must be carefully cultivated and begin with a renewed US strategic message. Over the years, Washington has lost its voice and requires branding to accompany the new approach.

Examining the strategy further, it can be broken down into four interim objectives in the region: (1) attract partners while reducing CCP legitimacy; (2) shape, deter, or defeat CCP malign security encroachments; (3) improve regional resilience; and (4) empower regional actors to lead with US backing. These objectives will be met through the four lines of effort (LOE) of influence, security, diplomatic, and economic and outreach across three phases. The phases seek to rebrand the US strategy as “by, with, and through” partner nations coupled with a concerted effort to address US hypocrisy. It will then set conditions favorable to US interests in the region, and finally, it will deter or punish CCP transgressions. Figure 1 provides a graphic depiction of the strategy and its associated campaigns. It seeks to attack the CCP

critical vulnerabilities (CV) of inconsistent narrative and ideology to ultimately address the center of gravity (COG) of legitimacy as outlined in the strategic estimate. This specificity adds texture to the current US response and further defines the “how” of attracting partners for common goals.

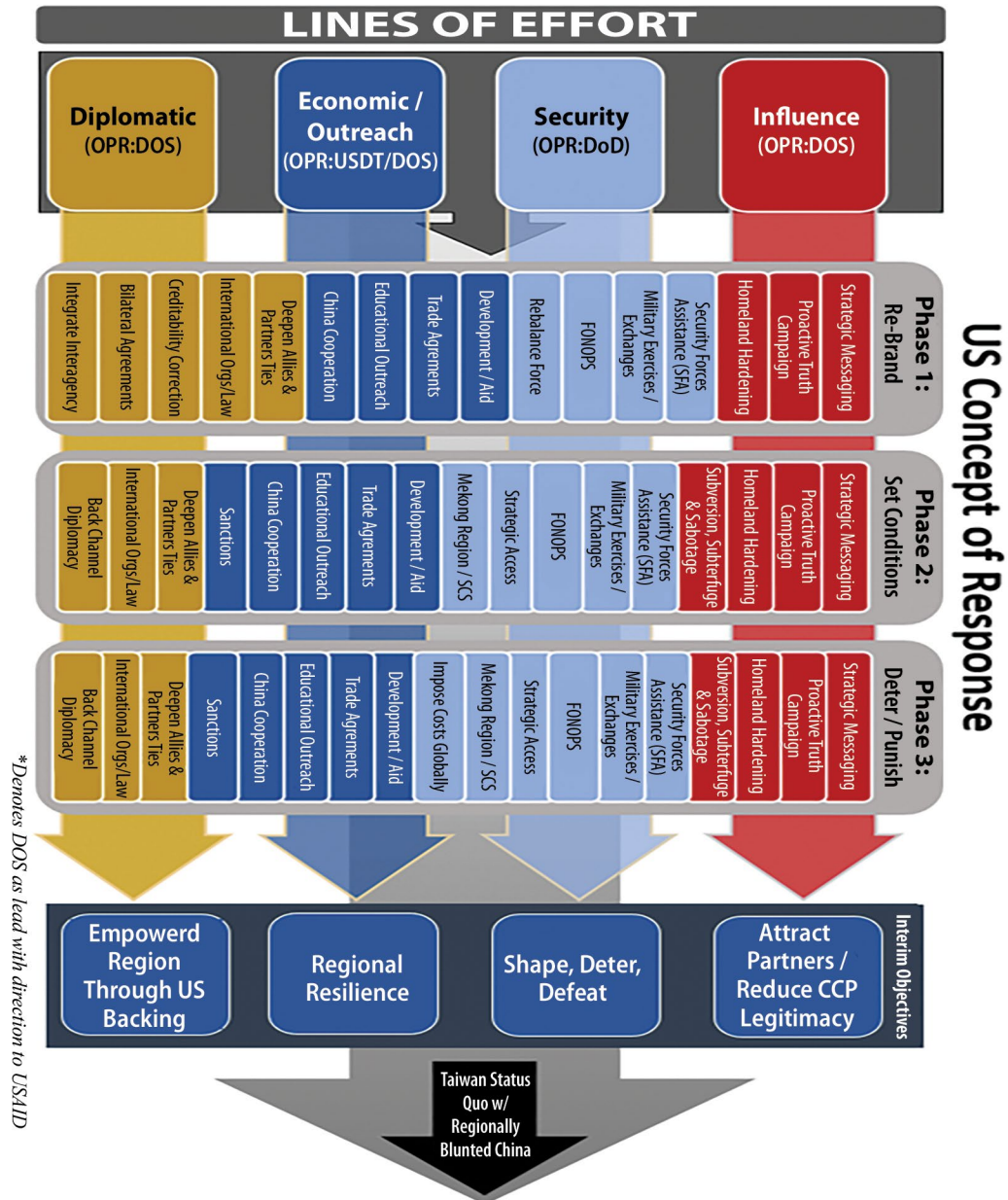


Figure 1. US concept of response

Authorities

Phase one of the strategy focuses on rebranding the US effort and reducing hypocrisy. For Washington to establish distinct differences between the CCP theory of victory and that of the United States, there must be a concerted effort to ensure legal justification exists. There is no easier way to undermine US strategic messaging as the ardent champion of a free and open Southeast Asia than to erode its legitimacy through a lack of legal justification. However, this does not indicate that transparency will be inherent in all US actions. Covert and clandestine operations can and should be considered but need to be carefully reviewed for legal justification and accompanied by a risk assessment to ensure the measures chosen further strategic objectives without undue risk to US legitimacy.

The United States possesses a robust legal framework to execute the strategy. By effectively leveraging existing authorities already granted to the US interagency, initiatives can be developed to maximize what is already bestowed via US Code (U.S.C.) Title 10, Title 22, Title 28, and Title 50, for example.¹ However, Title 10 U.S.C., Chapter 16, § 333—Foreign Security Forces: Authority to Build Partner Capacity, should be revised to include search-and-rescue (SAR) operations as a covered activity.² This will clarify guidance for the Department of Defense (DOD) on the legal authority and funding for building partner SAR force capacity. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) should submit the change in its annual draft legislative proposals.³ Although this change is not required for strategy implementation, it would streamline the funding and authorities for this particular campaign. Section 333 has a provision that allows the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) to conduct “. . . activities that contribute to an existing international coalition,” which can be leveraged now.⁴ Finally, Title 10 U.S.C., Chapter 20, § 404—Foreign Disaster Assistance, provides short-term authority to conduct SAR operations.⁵

Other legal considerations should be taken into account, such as the US ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

¹ James Q. Roberts, “Need Authorities for the Gray Zone? Stop Whining. Instead, Help Yourself to Title 100. Hell, Take Some Title 200 While You’re At It,” *PRISM Security Studies Journal* 6, no. 3 (2016), 30, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

² “Foreign Security Forces: Authority to Build Partner Capacity,” Title 10 United States Code (U.S.C.), Chapter 16 § 333 (2016), <https://uscode.house.gov/>.

³ Chad A. Senior, “Search and Rescue: An Underutilized Tool for Security Cooperation” (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2021), 30.

⁴ “Foreign Security Forces.”

⁵ “Humanitarian and Other Assistance,” Title 10 United States Code (U.S.C.), Chapter 20 § 404 (1995), <https://uscode.house.gov/>.

agreement and the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, to name a few. However, these legal actions are woven into the strategy implementation and phasing to garner legitimacy in the *rebrand* phase and thus will be covered in more depth later.

Assumptions

Crafting the regional strategy requires making certain planning assumptions. If proven false, their revision would necessitate reevaluating the strategy for adjustment or discarding it altogether, depending on the shifts observed in the international landscape. Several planning assumptions were made in crafting this strategy that influence the deployment of instruments of national power and phasing, as well as the means available for strategy implementation. Three criteria tested the assumptions—*validity, importance, and necessity*—to ensure they did not artificially support the strategy and neglect the most challenging problem sets.⁶

US Military Support of Taiwan

The United States has maintained an unofficial relationship with Taiwan since 1979 and has operated under “strategic ambiguity” regarding US actions if the CCP were to attack Taiwan.⁷ This strategy assumes that the United States would view CCP kinetic action against Taiwan as a red line spurring military action. President Biden has publicly stated four times since August 2021 that the United States will defend Taiwan, although the official policy remains unchanged.⁸ Furthermore, US strategic documents prioritize China as the pacing threat and thus direct defense resources to combat it. The DOD’s focus on the Taiwan scenario is clear due to its priority as a wargame scenario.⁹ For these reasons, it is prudent to include the need to prepare for open conflict against the CCP over the contested status of Taiwan. Southeast Asia thus becomes the major backdrop to any such action.

US Level of Commitment

For a strategy that heavily relies on integrating allies and partners, *it is necessary to assume that US commitment to the region will have staying power that transcends*

⁶ David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2022), 76.

⁷ Susan V. Lawrence, “Taiwan: Political and Security Issues,” *In Focus*, 17 February 2023, 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

⁸ Lawrence, “Taiwan,” 2.

⁹ Valerie Insinna, “A US Air Force War Game Shows What the Service Needs to Hold off—or Win against—China in 2030,” *Defense News*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

presidential administrations. Although it is realistic to expect course corrections as administrations change, building integrated security and development relationships in the region requires an enduring commitment to cultivate the relationships and realize progress. Although the Trump administration championed an “America First” slogan, his *National Security Strategy* still prioritized cultivating partnerships in Southeast Asia. It stated, “we will redouble our commitment to establishing alliances and partnerships.”¹⁰ The significance of the threat posed by the CCP, coupled with the bipartisan support for recent National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA), indicates that US commitment to the region is likely enduring.

While recent government spending increases are notable, it’s premature to assume they will persist. The federal government is projected to reach the USD 31.4 trillion debt ceiling by summer, prompting US House Republicans to advocate for spending cuts before raising it.¹¹ By 2035, the combined Social Security trust funds are set to become insolvent without program adjustments, and the nuclear triad essential for US strategic deterrence will necessitate substantial refurbishment.¹² This impending surge in costs, along with internal social pressures, *requires that a planning assumption be made that US budgets will remain flat or decrease.* Such constraints significantly affect available strategic resources.

Implementation

As per the theory of success, this strategy heavily relies on fostering and strengthening cooperation with the nations of Southeast Asia. Repeated wargames have demonstrated that engaging in military confrontation with the CCP in the region is ill-advised.¹³ The United States faces significant challenges in projecting sustained military power at the necessary scale to confront China. The vast expanse of the Pacific presents logistical hurdles, making it time-consuming to amass

¹⁰ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 46, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

¹¹ David Morgan, “House Republicans to Highlight US Debt Ahead of Biden Budget Proposal,” *Reuters*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.msn.com/>.

¹² The Board of Trustees, “The 2022 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds,” 82nd Annual Report (Washington, DC: Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds, 2 June 2022), 5, <https://www.ssa.gov/>; and Rebecca K.C. Hersman and Joseph Rodgers, “Nuclear Modernization Under Competing Pressures,” *Transition 46* (Washington, DC: Project on Nuclear Issues, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2021), 5, <https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/>.

¹³ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War—Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), January 2023), 3, <https://www.csis.org/>.

forces for any potential action.¹⁴ In scenarios like the Taiwan Straits, time is of the essence, with little room for delay. However, the potential for conventional conflict remains, as the CCP has not ruled out forcefully seizing Taiwan.¹⁵ President Biden has reiterated US willingness to support Taiwan in such a situation on multiple occasions.¹⁶

A *fait accompli* scenario thus presents the *most dangerous* course of action for which this strategy must prepare. By doing so, it confronts many of the CCP's LOEs outlined in the strategic estimate. The second phase, *set conditions*, aims to mobilize the partnerships reinforced during Phase I, *rebrand*, to ensure the region is adequately equipped to resist a CCP attempt at forcibly seizing Taiwan. Successfully deterring such an act thwarts CCP objectives of achieving hegemony through coercion or force and bolsters US objectives.

In contrast to a *fait accompli* in Taiwan, IW represents the *most likely* course of action and the one favored by the CCP. Through IW tactics like malign influence and subversion, the CCP seeks to compel Taiwan's reunification without resorting to overt conflict.¹⁷ This tactic aims to evade open conflict with the United States while advancing toward hegemony at minimal cost.¹⁸ It is these divisive tactics that this strategy aims to counter. The inability to effectively counter CCP IW campaigns is a significant gap in the current US strategy that this plan seeks to rectify.

Addressing both the *most dangerous* and *most likely* scenarios concurrently distinguishes this strategy from the current government response and clarifies its causal logic. The United States can exploit the actions necessary to establish conditions in the region for open conflict with the CCP to simultaneously thwart CCP IW activities, thereby depriving them of the capacity to mobilize for open conflict. This can be achieved by exploiting the CCP's critical vulnerabilities of inconsistent narrative and authoritarian ideology. Addressing these critical vulnerabilities enables the strategy to undermine the CCP's legitimacy (both internally and internationally), which is its COG, as previously discussed. Further discussion on this will be provided in subsequent sections covering the strategy's phases.

¹⁴ Cancian, Cancian, and Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War*, 20.

¹⁵ Xi Jinping, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects," Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Beijing: CCP, 16 October 2022), 42, <http://dm.china-embassy.gov.cn/>.

¹⁶ Lawrence, "Taiwan," 2.

¹⁷ Yimou Lee, David Lague, and Ben Blanchard, "China Launches 'Gray-Zone' Warfare to Subdue Taiwan," *Reuters*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹⁸ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order, Bridging the Gap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5.

Leveraging regional partners serves as a force multiplier, curtailing the CCP's maneuverability and thus limiting China's capacity to wield its instruments of national power to execute its operational art for strategic gain. Furthermore, aligning partners toward common objectives diminishes the fiscal burden that Washington would otherwise shoulder if pursuing goals unilaterally. This cost reduction, achieved through dispersion, mitigates the risks associated with stagnant or decreasing US budgets as outlined in the assumptions.

Notable is the arrangement of arrows in the graphical representation of the strategy (refer to fig. 1). While linearly depicted through a familiar depiction of LOEs and phases, this portrayal oversimplifies strategy execution. The offset, overlapping, and embedded arrows illustrate the matrixed approach necessary for effective strategy execution. A regional strategy involves nuanced country-specific considerations that cannot be accurately captured in this depiction, complicating simplistic phasing. To enhance the graphical representation, it is more apt to envision the campaigns as books on a library shelf. One must remove the book from the shelf, open it to reveal its pages, and grasp the intricacies required at the local level to ensure unified efforts toward objectives. Consequently, the phases will comprehensively present the LOEs and embedded campaigns to emphasize critical themes. Some campaigns span multiple phases to build upon prior activities and will be reintroduced as necessary to underscore their evolving contributions to the strategy. Other components of the strategy, though essential, closely align with the current US approach and are thus omitted to avoid redundancy.

Phase I: Rebrand

The United States has faltered in its international leadership in recent years. The failed nation-building endeavors in Iraq and Afghanistan, followed by the abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan, have undercut US global standing. Additionally, Pres. Donald Trump's America First rhetoric has further tarnished the perception of American leadership on the world stage. During the Cold War era, the United States projected itself as the "leader of the free world." However, it can be argued that Washington has since lost its influence and needs to reaffirm its position with a fresh message alongside a renewed dedication to the international rules-based order. This revamped message could prioritize "leading with values, collaborating for a free future." Such a rebranding would underscore the importance of partnerships and the necessity of cooperation for achieving success without compromising the core values of the United States. Introducing a new strategic message would serve as the initial step in demonstrating to the world the seriousness of the US commitment to the rules-based order and Southeast Asia.

Addressing US Hypocrisy

Simply adjusting US strategic messaging will not suffice to rebrand Washington's strategy. Sincerity can only be demonstrated through concrete actions. These actions can subsequently foster renewed trust and deepen cooperation. To achieve this, the United States should strive to rectify past mistakes that have undermined its legitimacy. The revamped strategic messaging campaign should be synchronized with tangible actions to provide a compelling example for the region to observe. Washington should synchronize its ratification of the UNCLOS agreement shortly after unveiling its new strategic message to offer a tangible demonstration of its commitment to reducing contradictions and adhering to international agreements.

Ratifying UNCLOS would enhance US legitimacy among Southeast Asian nations and the broader international community. Currently, 157 countries have signed UNCLOS, but the United States is not among them.¹⁹ While congressional resistance to the signing of UNCLOS is anticipated, it is manageable given the contemporary geopolitical environment and competition with the CCP. Multiple presidential administrations have endorsed UNCLOS, as have all Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) since 1982.²⁰ Proposing UNCLOS ratification to Congress should be linked to the competition with the CCP and Russia to enhance its appeal and make opposition a more challenging stance for those with traditionally hawkish national security constituencies.

The US frequently cites CCP violations of UNCLOS, particularly in the South China Sea (SCS). Incidents such as the 2012 Scarborough Shoal dispute with the Philippines led to the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling against China's nine-dash line claims and land reclamation activities.²¹ However, Washington's efforts to highlight CCP violations are severely hindered by the United States' non-membership in the treaty. Signing UNCLOS would bolster US legitimacy and provide a platform from which to condemn CCP actions more effectively.

Ironically, the United States has assumed the role of de facto guardian of UNCLOS. The treaty also serves as a cornerstone of legitimacy for many other US initiatives, with its signing offering significant advantages to US IW operations, particularly in relation to the CCP. Activities in this and subsequent phases, such

¹⁹ Will Schrepferman, "Hypocri-Sea: The United States' Failure to Join the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea," *Harvard International Review*, 31 October 2019, <https://hir.harvard.edu/>.

²⁰ Lara Malaver, "It Is Time for the United States to Ratify UNCLOS," *Proceedings* 147, no. 6 (1 June 2021), <https://www.usni.org/>.

²¹ Nestor Herico, "China's Use of Influence in the Philippines and Southeast Asia," e-mail response to the author, 30 November 2022.

as freedom of navigation operations and exclusive economic zones (EEZ), derive their legitimacy from UNCLOS. Moreover, CCP actions, such as constructing land features to enhance military power projection and employing the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) to intimidate and encroach upon the economic rights of neighboring nations, flagrantly violate UNCLOS, thus positioning it as a crucial element of US "lawfare."²²

Continuing to operate the Guantanamo Bay (GTMO) detention camp is another misstep by the United States that demands correction. GTMO has become synonymous with "enhanced interrogation techniques" and human rights abuses. Its closure would represent a significant stride toward restoring US legitimacy and signaling to the world US commitment to rectifying past injustices. Confronting the GTMO dilemma directly would serve as a form of soul-searching for the United States, fostering humility that could pave the way for constructive dialogue with Southeast Asian countries, even those with questionable human rights records.

The closure of GTMO would undoubtedly stir controversy and should once again be linked to efforts aimed at countering CCP narratives to garner political backing. The US legal system has demonstrated its capacity to manage GTMO cases effectively.²³ Thomas Pevehouse's thesis, *The Strategic Case for a New Terrorist Detention Policy*, presents a comprehensive strategy for shutting down GTMO and enhancing US legitimacy.²⁴ His proposed approach would mitigate the risks associated with GTMO's closure through a phased process.

By shuttering GTMO, Washington can starkly contrast US values with those of the CCP. Acknowledging the GTMO debacle demonstrates humility and signals a departure from past practices. It also serves as a catalyst for renewed US condemnation of the CCP's actions. The CCP frequently deflects criticism of its treatment of Uyghurs and Tibetans by deflecting questions about its human rights record and redirecting blame toward the United States, citing GTMO and historical slavery.²⁵ By directly addressing past transgressions, the United States diminishes the CCP's ability to weaponize this historical narrative, compelling Beijing to confront the issue. Confronting past mistakes limits the CCP's maneu-

²² Jeff M. Smith, "UNCLOS: China, India, and the United States Navigate an Unsettled Regime," *Background*, Heritage Foundation, 30 April 2021, 4–12, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

²³ Thomas Pevehouse, "The Strategic Case for the New Terrorist Detention Policy" (thesis, Washington, DC, National Defense University, College of International Security Affairs, 2022), 24.

²⁴ Pevehouse, "The Strategic Case for the New Terrorist Detention Policy."

²⁵ Leyland Cecco, "China Issues Furious Response after Canada Condemns Human Rights Record," *The Guardian*, 22 June 2021, sec. Global development, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

verability and enables Washington to exploit cracks in Beijing's narrative to undermine CCP legitimacy.

Reorganize

The US interagency must streamline its organization to generate synchronized effects that are time-phased and responsive to the rapid flow of information in today's environment. With the *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* prioritizing integrated deterrence, coordination among interagency actors and host nations becomes vital for both unity of effort and unity of action.²⁶ Coordination becomes particularly complex when addressing the diverse needs of the various countries within Southeast Asia.

The Department of State (DOS) typically leads US engagement in foreign nations outside of conflict situations, with the role of interagency integration falling to the chief of mission (COM), typically the ambassador to the respective country.²⁷ This country-specific framework implies the potential for 11 distinct coordination efforts across Southeast Asian countries, complicating efforts to achieve unity of effort within a regional strategy. Under this framework, the role of integrator is unfortunately elevated to the secretary of state or even the president, highlighting the shortcomings of this approach and impeding regional unity of effort.

Accommodating county specific nuances to foster deeper partnerships, especially in dealing with IW activities is key to success. However, while local specificity is crucial, a level of integration is necessary at the regional level to coordinate strategies across COMs, ensuring coherence in both effort and action. Elevating this coordination to the National Security Council (NSC) or the president risks diluting speed, effectiveness, and unity of effort. While the Joint Task Force (JTF) concept could fulfill this need, it should be established as an enduring entity rather than being erected for a specific task and thus limited in duration. Figure 2 illustrates this concept and the associated challenge. Establishing a persistent JTF construct positioned between the whole-of-government approach and multilateral efforts would help fuse local specifics with regional direction, ensuring a cohesive approach.²⁸

²⁶ "Joint Guide for Interagency Doctrine," Supplement to Joint Publication 3-08: *Interorganizational Cooperation Appendices* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 4 November 2019), F-3.

²⁷ Joint Publication 3-08: *Interorganizational Cooperation* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 12 October 2016), III-1, <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

²⁸ "Joint Guide for Interagency Doctrine," C-1.

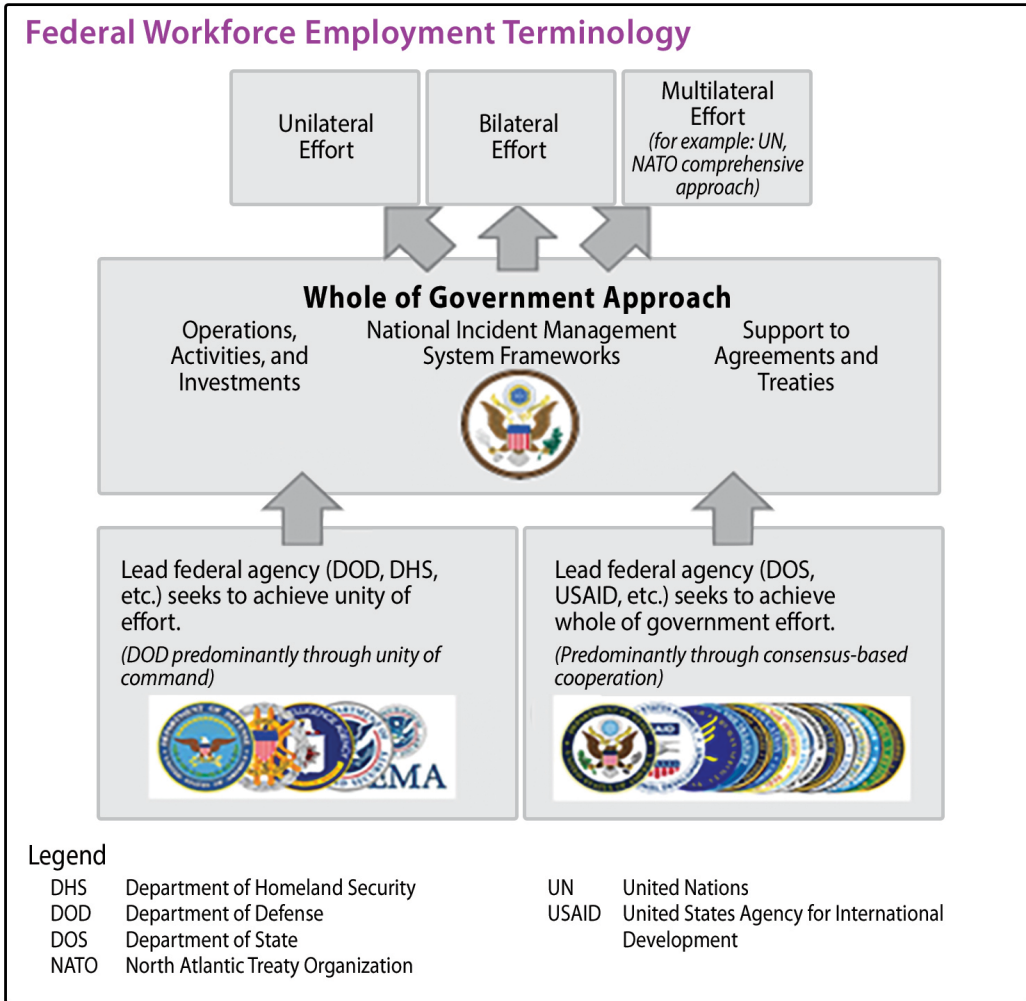


Figure 2. Proposed enduring JTF construct

Trade

Joining what is now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) would constitute a significant step by the US on the trade front, signaling commitment and openness to the region. President Trump’s withdrawal of the United States from the then-called Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January 2017 came despite substantial negotiations conducted by both the Bush and Obama administrations. The primary concern with the TPP revolved around its potential “to accelerate US decline in manufacturing, lower

wages, and increase inequity.”²⁹ However, the TPP also boasted significant upside, with one think tank “projecting an added \$130 billion to US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2030, or an increase of about 0.5 percent.”³⁰

The CPTPP also holds strategic significance pertinent to this strategy, particularly in ensuring the US maintains leadership in establishing global trade rules. Economically, the CPTPP would unite 40 percent of the global GDP and approximately a third of world trade, according to former US Trade Representative (USTR) Ambassador Michael Froman. Moreover, many analysts regard the TPP as a litmus test for US credibility in the region. By fostering trade ties among nations, the TPP promotes cooperation, thereby advancing US influence in the region, where strategic success hinges on partnerships.³¹ While President Biden currently opposes rejoining the TPP, he has expressed willingness “to renegotiate it to include stronger labor and environmental provisions.”³² Nonetheless, the United Kingdom’s accession as the twelfth member of the CPTPP in July 2023 underscores the pressure for the United States to reconsider its stance.³³

President Biden has subsequently introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a welcomed initiative to reintegrate US engagement in regional trade agreements. However, it lacks the binding nature and specificity of the CPTPP, which represents a more substantive step forward. The IPEF represents a positive stride for the United States in initiating regional influence and norm-setting. Nevertheless, a binding trade agreement like the CPTPP would validate US commitment, a factor continuously assessed by regional actors.

Phase II: Set Conditions

This phase is dedicated to strengthening ties with our regional partners to address common objectives. To achieve this, Washington must prioritize US efforts, recognizing that not all partnerships hold equal significance. Prioritization of partners would be an internal process, not publicly disclosed, aimed at directing resources toward the most critical needs. Table 1 proposes an initial ranking of partnerships, offering detailed insights into their utility to the United States in a scenario involving a Taiwan invasion. However, this prioritization is merely a start-

²⁹ James McBride, Andrew Chatzky, and Anshu Siripurapu, “What’s Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 September 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

³⁰ McBride, Chatzky, and Siripurapu, “What’s Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership?”

³¹ Ian F. Fergusson and Brock R. Williams, *The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): Key Provisions and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 14 June 2016), 4–5, <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

³² McBride, Chatzky, and Siripurapu, “What’s Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership?”

³³ Phillip Inman, “UK Joins Asia-Pacific CPTPP Trade Bloc That Includes Japan and Australia,” *The Guardian*, 31 March 2023, sec. Business, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

ing point. It must then be supplemented with an assessment of each partner's objectives and constraints to identify areas of alignment and chart focused country-specific strategies. Prioritization, coupled with clearly defined goals, lays the groundwork for nurturing relationships based on mutual respect and shared interests.³⁴ For Washington, this often involves engaging in active listening rather than dominating conversations.

Subsequently, Washington should actively prepare regional leaders, such as Japan, and international bodies, such as ASEAN, to assume greater regional leadership responsibilities. While this shift may entail relinquishing direct control over the region, it offers gains in regional legitimacy and presents the United States as a committed partner rather than a dictatorial authority. However, this transition in regional leadership should be gradual and deliberate. It necessitates careful steps to ensure that partners are adequately equipped for their enhanced roles and prepared to serve as primary voices against the CCP, supported by US strength and resources. Throughout this endeavor, the Influence LOE will encompass an information campaign to ensure that the initiative is not perceived as a tactical withdrawal by the United States. Messaging must be synchronized with that of ASEAN and our partner nations to lend it legitimacy.

Table 1. Proposed US prioritization of partnerships

Country	Relationship Vector	US Interests during Conflict w/CCP
Brunei	Maintain	Development
Cambodia	Strengthen	Resilience (China Reliance)
Indonesia	Deepen	Naval Choke Points, Access
Laos	Maintain	Resilience (China Reliance)
Malaysia	Deepen	Naval Choke Points
Myanmar (Burma)	Maintain	Naval Choke Points
Philippines	Deepen	Treaty Partner, SCS Disputes, Access
Singapore	Deepen	Treaty Partner, Access
Thailand	Deepen	Treaty Partner, Hedging Alley, Access
Timor-Leste	Maintain	Development
Vietnam	Deepen	SCS Disputes, Access

³⁴ Anonymous, "The Perspective of Middle Power Countries" (Chancellor's Lecture Series (CLS), National Defense University, College of International Security Affairs, Marshall Hall 155, 15 March 2023).

The Power of Truth and Red Lines

The current US strategy concerning Taiwan has been labeled as *strategic ambiguity*, a tactic that effectively introduces uncertainty into the CCP's decision-making process regarding Taiwan, as Beijing cannot ascertain the US stance on potential intervention. While this ambiguity may prove effective in certain scenarios, it deviates from conventional deterrence theory, where clarity is preferred. Effective deterrence comprises three key components: capability, credibility, and communication.³⁵ Clear communication, often delineated by red lines, is crucial to ensuring that the CCP comprehends the deterrence measures in place, particularly in the context of CCP gray-zone activities.

Realistic red lines established by the United States must be enforced to maintain credibility. Two examples include restricting further construction of land features or additional militarization of existing features in the SCS by the CCP, and ensuring compliance with UNCLOS in the SCS, with robust enforcement of violations.³⁶ Given the inherently realist nature of the CCP's strategy, Beijing respects strength and seeks to exploit weaknesses.³⁷ Communicating these red lines serves to complicate CCP gray-zone activities and lays the groundwork for US and partner responses in Phase III if these lines are disregarded. These communications can be conveyed discreetly through backdoor diplomacy or overtly broadcasted, depending on the situation at hand.

The truth campaign serves as a complement to the establishment of red lines, bolstering US responses to CCP rhetoric in the information domain by countering CCP narratives with irrefutable facts. The focus here lies in disseminating or magnifying inconsistencies in CCP messaging to undermine their legitimacy. A notable example is the CCP's assertion of supporting state sovereignty while actively undermining it, particularly in areas like the SCS. Swift and widespread rebuttals are necessary, and employing ridicule may be deemed appropriate. Leveraging the potency of truth has the potential to sow discord and prompt the CCP to reassess its approach to engaging in the information domain.

³⁵ Robert P. Haffa, Jr., "The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies for Great Power Competition," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2018), 96–97, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

³⁶ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy*, Strategy Papers (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2021), 71, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

³⁷ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram*, 66.

Building Partner Capacity by Vignette

Building partner capacity (BPC) is essential to bolster partners' resilience against CCP coercion, enhance military resistance, and facilitate integration with US forces. While BPC activities are already underway in the region, a deliberate approach is necessary to achieve multiple objectives. While not every type of force can fulfill these objectives, they are nonetheless attainable. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities will be vital across the region, although their deployment may be viewed as escalatory by the CCP. Therefore, the development of such forces may be more suitable for Phase III BPC activities. In Phase II, less provocative forms of activity may be preferable.

SAR forces and humanitarian response and disaster relief (HA/DR) capabilities are highly sought after in the region and are consistently requested on an annual basis, indicating alignment between partner nations and US needs.³⁸ SAR forces currently benefit from extensive basing options in the region and are not perceived as escalatory due to their focus on life-saving operations. However, the requisite command-and-control structures and associated skill sets can provide dual-use capabilities during a conflict, thereby positioning critical capacity within the first island chain to enhance battlefield awareness. Additionally, SAR forces can assuage concerns of countries hesitant to engage in US security relationships due to fears of CCP reprisal. The nonthreatening nature of SAR operations can deepen relationships and pave the way for more conventional security partnerships in the future. Finally, forces such as SAR units facilitate access and placement in the region and offer the potential for basing and equipment storage in the event of a conflict.

Phase III: Deter or Punish

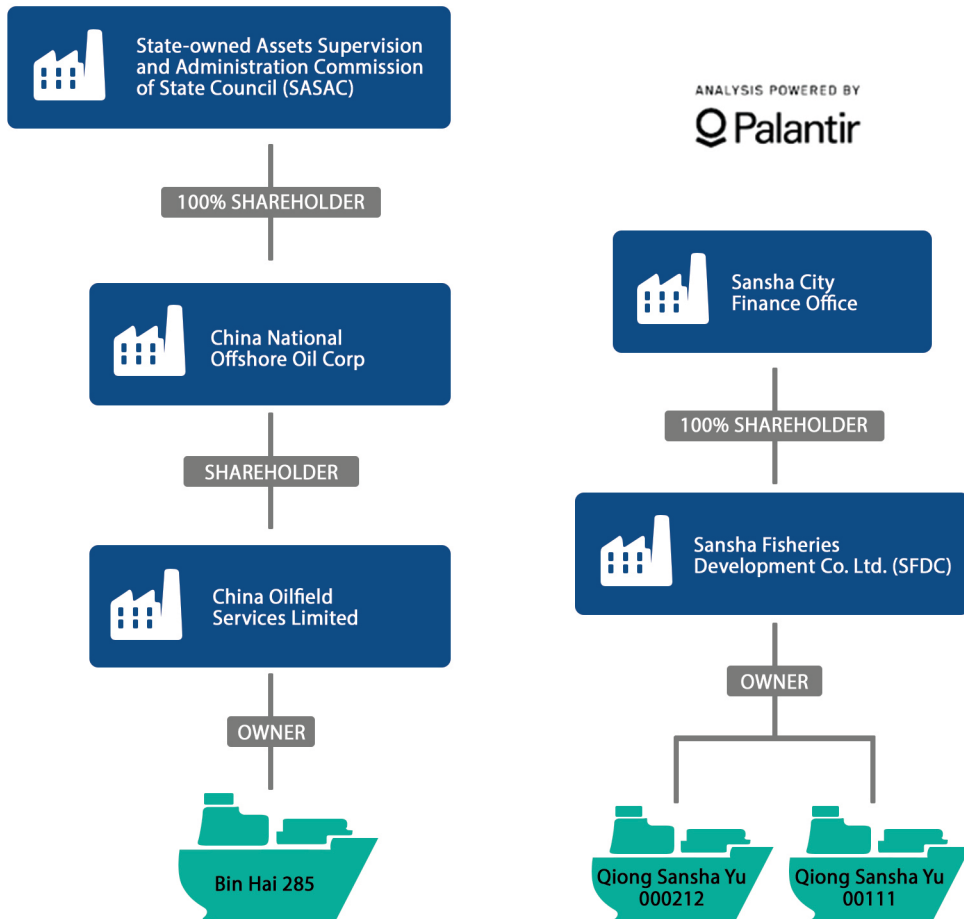
The deterrence posture established in Phase II lays the groundwork for deployment in Phase III, as needed. Phase III encompasses three primary areas of action short of conventional conflict: (1) IW efforts in the SCS, (2) undermining CCP objectives in the region and mainland China through subversive measures, and (3) imposing global costs on the CCP if competition escalates to conflict.

IW Efforts

If UNCLOS violations persist, sanctions should be imposed on the PAFMM and associated fishing vessels. It is unequivocal that the militia is organized, funded,

³⁸ *ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlook 2022* (Phnom Penh: ASEAN, 2022), 35, <https://asean.regionalforum.asean.org/>.

and directed by the Chinese government.³⁹ Sanctions will target militia funding and ownership networks, as depicted in figure 3.⁴⁰ In the event of CCP denial of ownership of these assets, prosecution under existing legal frameworks should proceed with minimal concern of escalation.



Corporate networks revealing links between maritime militia vessels and Chinese government entities

Figure 3. CCP Maritime Militia government links

Partners and the United States must be prepared to employ force when faced with offensive actions by CCP-controlled vessels, such as ramming or other hostile

³⁹ Gregory B. Poling et al., “Pulling Back the Curtain on China’s Maritime Militia,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), November 2021), 14, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁴⁰ Poling et al., “Pulling Back the Curtain on China’s Maritime Militia,” 28.

activities.⁴¹ Partners can collaborate with US advisors to execute the sinking of an aggressive vessel as a deterrent through punitive measures. Such an operation should be preceded by the release of ISR footage documenting unsafe and illegal CCP activities. The CCP's refusal to claim responsibility for such vessels further solidifies US and partner legitimacy when gray-zone activities escalate to vessel sinkings.

On 10 November 2023, the United States achieved significant progress in this area by reaffirming that "Article IV of the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft—including those of its Cost Guard—anywhere in the South China Sea." This announcement is a compelling testament to the bolstering of US resolve in the region and serves as a tangible example of advancements in establishing clear red lines, as previously discussed.⁴² This announcement closely followed the enhancement of the EDCA with the Philippines, indicating a clearly positive trajectory with a key ally in the region.

CCP Subversion

CCP subversion campaigns represent the next phase of the truth campaign and are executed as a component of the Influence LOE. They are deferred until Phase III because their aim is to undermine CCP legitimacy and target the COG by exploiting CVs. Both inconsistencies in CCP narratives and ideology can be exploited for this purpose. However, in this phase, subversion within China itself becomes a potential option but must be carefully evaluated against the associated risks. Substantial success in CCP subversion that destabilizes the Party could lead to significant escalation, particularly if the actions become attributable to the United States or its partners.

This strategy will utilize the information domain to reach the population in mainland China and target audiences in partner nations. In the latter case, the partner in question must take the lead role, operating within the bounds of their legal frameworks. The objective is to instill resistance in the local population based on truth rather than disinformation. The method of dissemination could involve various social media platforms, including Zhihu (the Chinese equivalent of Quora), Douban (similar to IMDB or Flixster), Youku (comparable to YouTube), Weibo (China's Facebook), QQ (similar to MSN Messenger), and WeChat (which com-

⁴¹ Poling et al., "Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia," 27.

⁴² "U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea" (press release, US Department of State, 10 November 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

bines WhatsApp and PayPal functionalities.)”⁴³ The targeted message may focus on the contrast between the CCP elite and the “proletariat,” conveyed through images, memes, or commentary. Themes could highlight the wealth accumulated by Xi Jinping or create division within the CCP by targeting former members of the Politburo who have been marginalized in favor of Xi’s inner circle.⁴⁴

Subversion tradecraft, such as fellow travelers or fifth columns, presents alternative attack vectors beyond the information domain that warrant exploration.⁴⁵ In this realm, the United States should assess potential networks for support based on three key criteria: consonance, capability, and resilience. This approach ensures that essential resources and personnel are allocated to the most viable actors. The objective of subversion is to escalate costs by compelling the CCP to contend with internal divisions, diverting attention from their desired objectives. When executed with skill, subversive activities remain undetected by the enemy and are not attributable even if discovered.⁴⁶

Imposing Costs Globally

In the punitive phase of Phase III, the United States must be ready to escalate any conflict into a global imposition of costs. This can be achieved through conventional military capabilities or covert operations. CCP foreign interests in locations such as Djibouti or South America are vulnerable targets and are susceptible to attack. Holding global CCP interests hostage adds another layer of complexity to CCP decision making, as they lack the international power-projection capabilities of the United States. Signaling is crucial for the deterrence posture. The CCP does not need to be informed of the specific targets that will be held hostage, but rather that initiating conflict will result in repercussions for global CCP interests.

Means

To effectively implement the tasks outlined in this strategy, the US must prioritize reallocating executive branch budgets, with a substantial increase directed toward the DOS to oversee the diplomatic mission in Southeast Asia as the primary coordinating office during competition. Adequate funding and staffing for DOS are essential to ensure robust diplomatic initiatives aimed at strengthening US

⁴³ Holmes Liao, “An Asymmetric Information Operations Strategy to Defeat the Chinese Communist Party,” *Global Taiwan Brief* 6, no. 20 (20 October 2021), <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram*, 64–65.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram*, 47.

⁴⁶ Howard Gambrell Clark, “Subversion, Subterfuge, Sabotage” (NDU/CIC Course, College of Information and Cyberspace, 2023).

relationships with regional partners. As former Secretary of Defense James Mattis once stated, “if you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately.”⁴⁷ His reasoning aligns with the core of this strategy, emphasizing the need for DOS to lead in partner building to effectively counter CCP influence warfare efforts.

To accomplish this, DOS requires a budget increase. The 2022 NDAA raised the DOS budget to USD 58.5 billion, a 10-percent increase from 2021.⁴⁸ This strategy proposes a cost-neutral realignment of USD 9 billion from the DOD budget to the DOS.⁴⁹ This reallocation can be achieved through modest adjustments to force structure across the services, as suggested by former Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) General David Goldfein, along with targeted reductions in the Army’s heavy machinery, such as tanks.⁵⁰ The realignment represents approximately five percent of the Army’s 2023 budget request. Except for security force assistance activities and BPC, anticipated war fighting in the Indo-Pacific region emphasizes greater reliance on air and naval capabilities than those provided by a standing army.⁵¹

Metrics

Metrics need to be crafted at the local level to ensure they accurately gauge progress, referred to as *measures of performance* (MOP), which ultimately contribute to achieving objectives, known as *measures of effectiveness* (MOE).⁵² Given the expansive nature of a regional strategy, metrics will concentrate on overarching and generalized phase transition criteria. However, it is crucial to recognize that individual country plans may advance independently along the transition criteria and phases.

⁴⁷ Alex Lockie, “Mattis Once Said If State Department Funding Gets Cut ‘Then I Need to Buy More Ammunition,’” *Business Insider*, 27 February 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/>.

⁴⁸ Antony J. Blinken, “The President’s Fiscal Year 2022 Budget,” (press release, US Department of State, 28 May 2021), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁴⁹ “Defense Budget Overview—United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request” (overview, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller]/Chief Financial Officer, March 2022), 2, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/>.

⁵⁰ Michael E. O’Hanlon, “How to Cut (and Not Cut) the Defense Budget,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), 9 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁵¹ Cancian, Cancian, and Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War*.

⁵² *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington DC: The Joint Staff, January 2024), 120, <https://jdeis.js.mil/>.

Phase II - Transition Metrics

The United States must unveil its fortified strategy initially through a strategic messaging campaign that aligns with an example showcasing its renewed commitment to Southeast Asia. Concurrently, it should establish the organizational structure necessary to execute the strategy. This results in the following MOEs that can be readily assessed: (1) an increased DOS budget of approximately USD 9 billion, (2) dissemination of the new US strategic message, (3) implementation of a revised enduring interagency regional organizational plan, and (4) addressing one area of US hypocrisy. While achieving these objectives would be optimal, it should not impede strategy implementation, as some nations may be willing to cooperate even without fulfilling these interim objectives.

Phase III – Transition Metrics

To transition from Phase II to Phase III, the focus shifts toward evaluating the status of US relationships in the region, the capacity of partner nations to withstand CCP coercion, and their willingness to bolster security partnerships to deter CCP adventurism contrary to US and regional objectives. The corresponding MOEs are outlined as follows:

1. The efficacy of ASEAN and Japan in spearheading the region and confronting CCP aggression,
2. The effectiveness of partner resilience and resistance efforts, and
3. The CCP's response to US and partner IW initiatives.

The first MOE can be assessed through both back-channel communications and public démarches highlighting coercive CCP activities by regional international bodies. A noticeable upward trend in willingness to confront the CCP serves as the desired transition indicator. The second MOE will be evaluated through the presence of embedded US special operations forces, who are likely to contribute to resilience and resistance efforts until regional partners develop their own assessment capabilities. Lastly, the third MOE involves analyzing trends in CCP IW activities to ascertain whether US and partner initiatives are mitigating their frequency. Data analytics will be utilized to identify any decrease in CCP IW activities and attribute causation to US and partner IW countermeasures aimed at deterring such actions.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation

The proposed strategy hinges heavily on cultivating relationships with regional partners to align with shared objectives. If the United States fails to attract partners, the risk associated with this strategy escalates. Nonetheless, wargaming reveals significant costs to the United States if competition escalates into conflict with the CCP.⁵³ This scenario is also unfavorable for Southeast Asia, as the region prefers a hedging strategy. The collapse of a superpower's influence in the region exposes Southeast Asian nations to the dominance of the remaining regional superpower, undermining their ability to hedge effectively. Given the coercive tactics employed by the CCP in the region, it is reasonable to assume that their unimpeded ascendancy would undermine the region's objectives. While this reality inherently mitigates some risks, Washington must ensure consistency in US messaging and reliability in its commitments to foster enduring partnerships with its allies.

US support for and engagement in IW activities, such as subversion and actions against the CCP's PAFMM, carries inherent risks. Each initiative must undergo thorough assessment to ensure its legal validity and to prevent undue erosion of US legitimacy. Moreover, the desired impact of the initiative must be carefully weighed against the potential for adverse consequences to determine the risk-reward relationship. However, some risks can be mitigated by collaborating with partner nations, allowing them to assume a leading role and reducing direct attribution to the United States.

It is important to acknowledge that any direct association with US state-sponsored efforts to disrupt or destabilize the CCP regime, particularly within mainland China, carries the risk of escalation. Preserving Party control and integrity constitutes a fundamental objective of the CCP. Additionally, the complete removal of the CCP could potentially result in regional instability and secondary consequences, akin to the challenges the United States encountered following regime change endeavors in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, activities like subversion must be non-attributable and offer plausible deniability. The CCP routinely employs such tactics in various domains, including information, cyberspace, academia, and media, as highlighted in Part 1 of this series. Hence, there's precedent for the United States, its allies and partner nations to leverage truth as a weapon in unconventional or subversive ways, all while minimizing the risk of measurable escalation.

⁵³ Cancian, Cancian, and Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War*, 3.

Furthermore, the US strategy of empowering regional entities like ASEAN and Japan to assume leadership roles in the region carries inherent risks. By voluntarily relinquishing power to other nations and international organizations, Washington effectively diminishes US leverage. However, this risk is somewhat mitigated by the stark realities demonstrated in Taiwan Strait wargames, which underscore the challenges associated with conventional conflict. The potential repercussions of projecting US military might within a condensed timeframe and possibly over an extended period underscore the importance of sharing regional power to prevent overextension of US military resources in the area.

This initiative is likely to be depicted by the CCP as a tactical retreat by the United States from the region, potentially heralded as a victory for the CCP. Consequently, strategic messaging must be carefully synchronized with regional partners to promptly lend support and counter any CCP narratives. To mitigate this risk, tactics involving social media, such as “first-and-flood” strategies, can be employed to rapidly disseminate the US strategic message en masse, effectively saturating and countering any CCP counternarratives. Once again, interagency and partner collaboration will be paramount to ensuring the strategy’s success and preventing significant harm during its early implementation stages.⁵⁴

It is crucial to recognize that all strategies carry inherent risks. However, this approach aims to mitigate risk through its pragmatic focus on addressing the most dangerous scenario to mitigate the risk of the *most likely* and *dangerous* scenarios simultaneously. Its incremental approach provides opportunities to de-escalate unintended tensions and normalize relations once deterrence measures are firmly established.

Conclusion

The United States must intensify its efforts to counter the detrimental effects of the CCP’s malign influence. Beijing adeptly employs this tactic as a gray-zone strategy to advance its strategic goals. There has been a misconception within the Pentagon that the *NDS* focuses on China as a shift away from IW strategies toward a conventional military buildup aimed at deterring CCP military aggression. This research contends otherwise. While conventional military deterrence is essential for shaping CCP decision making, it is imperative to develop and implement a robust IW strategy to outmaneuver the CCP in its preferred arena, the gray zone.

⁵⁴ Howard Gambrell Clark, *Influence Warfare Volume III: Case Studies*, draft (Washington DC: Narrative Strategies Ink, 2022).

To effectively counter the CCP, the United States must strive to comprehend the Party's motivations and strategic drivers. Analyzing the CCP's strategic estimate offers insight into these drivers, facilitating the construction of a counterstrategy. Unlike Western governments, the CCP does not strictly adhere to a peace-and-war dichotomy; instead, it operates along a continuum of conflict, employing tactics of unrestricted warfare. Understanding the CCP's worldview will inform more targeted strategies to achieve US objectives.

It is in the best interest of all parties, including the CCP, the United States, and the global community, to prevent superpower conflict. This underscores the critical role that IW should play in US strategies against the CCP, rather than diminishing its significance. The recommended strategy prominently features US partners and allies to limit CCP decision making while providing opportunities for Beijing to conform to global norms. Although this approach acknowledges that relying on partners and adhering to international law entails risks to US sovereignty, it recognizes that unilateral action by the United States alone may no longer suffice to address the challenges posed by the CCP.

China has been designated as the pacing challenge in the *NDS*, and the emphasis on *pacing* should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric, as numerous metrics indicate China's growing parity with or even surpassing of the United States. These metrics encompass areas such as missile defense, economic indicators, and technological advancement. Therefore, partners and allies offer the United States the asymmetric advantage necessary to bolster its capacity and capability to constrain CCP decision making without provoking escalation.

A free and open Indo-Pacific region is beneficial for the world at large. A forcible seizure of Taiwan would grant the CCP undue influence within the first island chain and encroach upon the EEZs of ASEAN nations. Consequently, the United States and like-minded nations present ASEAN members with the sole viable option to strengthen their security and safeguard their territorial integrity against CCP expansionist actions, particularly evident in the SCS. Many of these nations rightly opt for a hedging strategy to achieve their strategic goals, seeking reassurance from the United States in the region. Recognizing and capitalizing on this reality, Washington can significantly enhance strategic alignment with ASEAN nations. By reducing US inconsistencies and demonstrating unwavering commitment to the region through tangible actions that reinforce the US narrative, Washington will maintain its position as the preferred partner in the region. This strategic advantage is likely to prove decisive in the ongoing competition between the United States and the CCP. ✪

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Covert Connections

The LinkedIn Recruitment Ruse Targeting Defense Insiders

LT COL CALEB S. LISENBEE II, USAF

Abstract

Foreign adversaries, particularly China, are exploiting LinkedIn to conduct virtual espionage against current and former US Department of Defense (DOD) members. They create fake profiles and lucrative job solicitations to entice targets into divulging sensitive information or becoming recruited assets. This low-risk, low-cost tactic circumvents robust physical and cybersecurity defenses. Every DOD professional is a potential target, from senior leaders to junior personnel, as adversaries seek insights into future capabilities, vulnerabilities, research, operational concepts, and human intelligence networks. Successful recruitment can devastate national security by enabling technological replication, battlefield strategy countering, and compromising of critical personnel. Consequences for individuals include potential treason charges and ruined careers. To combat this threat, a focused US government counterespionage campaign is recommended, coupled with enhanced training, policies, and legal statutes explicitly addressing virtual espionage. Defensive measures must match the scale and sophistication of the virtual threat.

Unsolicited messages on LinkedIn, often masquerading as legitimate business opportunities, have become increasingly prevalent in recent years. These seemingly innocuous communications frequently mask ulterior motives, particularly when honing in on individuals with defense and security backgrounds. Beneath the guise of professional networking lurks a mounting peril of virtual espionage, with foreign adversaries leveraging the platform's perceived reliability to ensnare unwitting recruits for nefarious ends. Take, for instance, the following solicitation: "Paid Consulting Opportunity: I hope you're doing well. I'm currently working with a client who is researching security solutions. Based on your background, I think you'd be a great fit. If you're interested, it would be a ~1 hour phone call, and you would be compensated for your time on the phone with them at a prorated hourly rate of your choosing; typical rate range is \$200-300." This message stands as but one among a slew of suspicious unsolicited missives I have encountered on LinkedIn, a platform often hailed as the epitome of trustworthiness, particularly for networking purposes.¹ Many of

¹ Audrey Schomer, "LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram Most Trusted Platforms; Facebook Least," *Business Insider*, 26 September 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/>.

my peers—coworkers, colleagues, and friends alike—have attested to receiving similar offers over recent years. Foreign adversaries are leveraging LinkedIn in attempts to recruit both current and former Department of Defense (DOD) members, masquerading under the pretext of consulting, in a bid to gain strategic advantages in the great-power competition. This is facilitated by the low costs and risks associated with utilizing the platform for virtual espionage. In this article, I aim to elucidate this argument by identifying the targeted demographics and the sought-after information or positions by adversaries. Moreover, I will explore the repercussions of these attacks on the nation and the individuals who fall prey to them. Additionally, I will delve into the intricacies of espionage and the underlying psychological mechanisms of social engineering, shedding light on how adversaries pinpoint their targets on LinkedIn. Finally, I will offer recommendations on how to counter this looming threat. The United States possesses the capability to impose costs on adversaries engaged in virtual espionage, effectively making them pay for their transgressions.

As outlined in the current *National Security Strategy*, great-power competition stands as the foremost security challenge confronting the United States, with China emerging as the primary pacing threat. Adversaries persist in their endeavors to gather intelligence, engage in espionage, and pilfer critical information through any available means. Foreign intelligence operatives adeptly exploit human targets to establish connections with high-value individuals (HVI) within a target's professional network. In today's digitally driven world, virtual espionage looms as a formidable menace.

The 2023 US *National Cybersecurity Strategy* (NCS) highlights that “theft of data is growing rapidly and opening up novel vectors for malicious actors to surveil, manipulate, and blackmail individuals.”² The aspect of manipulation is particularly concerning when considering the exploitation of current and former DOD members for secrets, information, experience, and insights. Technology increasingly intertwines with human life, enhancing and enabling various aspects, including professional networking and collaboration. Social media platforms, particularly Microsoft's professional networking site LinkedIn, offer foreign intelligence services a rich target environment—a fact US counterintelligence chief William Evanina substantiated in 2018.³

For security reasons, this article refrains from discussing specific details of the problem, such as the number of reports being investigated by federal law enforce-

² *National Cybersecurity Strategy* (Washington: The White House, March 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

³ Kevin Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn to Hunt for Targets,” *BBC News*, 26 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

ment agencies like the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) regarding suspicious consulting offers over LinkedIn or the extent to which adversary attempts to solicit information or recruit spies from current and former DOD members have increased in recent years. Nevertheless, it is prudent to consider these questions.

That being said, the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) offers insight into the magnitude of the issue through statistics from the defense industry. In FY 2022, DCSA received over 26,000 suspicious contact reports from cleared contractor facilities, some of which were linked to social media activity.⁴ Furthermore, US and allied intelligence agencies have issued warnings about nations like the People's Republic of China (PRC) engaging in LinkedIn espionage. For instance, in 2018, the US publicly accused the PRC for the first time of leveraging LinkedIn to recruit Americans.⁵ Additionally, Gen C.Q. Brown, during his tenure as Chief of Staff (CSAF) of the US Air Force (USAF), alerted all Airmen in a September 2023 email about China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) recruitment efforts "to exploit their knowledge and skill to fill gaps in their military capability."⁶

A 2023 report by the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency reveals that social networking ranks among the most common contact methods for adversary intelligence services, particularly those originating from East Asia and the Pacific.⁷ A consulting offer serves merely as the initial enticement, paving the way for further exploitation. In the digital age, the acquisition, storage, and analysis of personal information far surpass "any secret police files" compiled by the Soviets during the Cold War.⁸ Moreover, advancements in algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) make analysis even more accessible. This article should be disseminated to all Transition Assistance Program (TAP) offices/facilitators, at the very least, to heighten threat awareness among military personnel transitioning out of service. The following section delves deeper into the target demographic.

⁴ *Targeting U.S. Technologies: A Report of Threats to Cleared Industry* (Washington: Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, 2023), <https://www.dcsa.mil/>.

⁵ Mika Aaltola, "Geostrategically Motivated Co-Option of Social Media: The Case of Chinese LinkedIn Spy Recruitment," Finnish Institute of International Affairs, June 2019, <https://www.fia.fi/>; and Warren Strobel and Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China of 'super Aggressive' Spy Campaign on LinkedIn," *Reuters*, 31 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁶ Gen Charles Q. Brown, Q., Chief of Staff of the Air Force, US Air Force (USAF), to all Airmen, (USAF), letter/email, subject: PLA Recruitment Efforts, 5 September 2023.

⁷ *Targeting U.S. Technologies*, 10.

⁸ Raef Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human: Cybersecurity for the Mind* (London: Cyber Simplicity, Ltd., 2019), 9.

Who Is Targeted?

Every current and former DOD member present on LinkedIn represents a potential target for LinkedIn espionage. From uniformed military personnel to civilians and defense contractors, current and former DOD members remain susceptible to virtual espionage. These individuals possess valuable information and secrets, may have access to items of interest, or could simply be exploited by foreign intelligence services to navigate a network of human connections to reach a HVI they seek to exploit. In 2018, the US Assistant Attorney General for National Security highlighted that China “is pursuing its goals through malign behaviors that exploit features of a free-market economy and an open society like ours.”⁹ LinkedIn provides another vector to do so.

Current and former DOD members become targets because the physical and technical defenses implemented within the DOD are robust and effectively thwart most technical intelligence collection methods. However, the stronger these protective measures become, the greater the vulnerability to social engineering attacks in the virtual realm.¹⁰ Furthermore, “lacking the necessary know-how for weapon systems production has, in fact, become a major obstacle for actors trying to imitate foreign technology—wealthy countries included.”¹¹ Human intelligence (HUMINT) often stands as the sole avenue to endeavor to gain access to an opponent’s secret intentions, plans, and technical specifications of weapon systems.¹²

This article emphasizes LinkedIn because DOD TAP offices strongly advocate for the platform among separating/retiring members. Enthusiastic defense professionals often share information to enhance their visibility and attract potential employers. While this practice aids in securing suitable employment or business opportunities, it also amplifies their susceptibility to foreign intelligence services. For instance, an agent for PRC intelligence created a “fake job advertisement” that

⁹ John C. Demers, “Statement of John C. Demers, Assistant Attorney General, National Security Division, US Department of Justice, before the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate for a Hearing on China’s Non-Traditional Espionage Against the United States: The Threat and Potential Policy Responses,” presented on 12 December 2018, 2, <https://www.justice.gov/>.

¹⁰ Kevin Mitnick and William L. Simon, *The Art of Deception: Controlling the Human Element of Security* (Indianapolis: Wiley, 2002), 259.

¹¹ Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage,” *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2019), 154, <https://doi.org/>.

¹² David Perry, “Ethics in the Recruiting and Handling of Espionage Agents,” in *National Security Intelligence and Ethics*, ed. Seumas Miller, Mitt Regan, and Patrick F. Walsh (New York: Routledge, 2021), 66.

garnered more than “400 CVs [curricula vitae] with 90% of them coming from US military and government personnel with security clearances.”¹³

LinkedIn serves as an ideal platform for large-scale espionage operations, enabling simultaneous outreach to thousands of individuals who meet specific targeting criteria. Disclosures from US and allied governments and intelligence agencies indicate that such operations are occurring on a significant scale. For instance, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) reported that more than 10,000 German defense and government practitioners were approached in 2017.¹⁴

Regardless of the length of one’s DOD career or whether they possess sought-after skills, secrets, or insights, they are highly likely to have joined the network of DOD professionals coveted by adversaries. Among these individuals are current or future senior leaders. LinkedIn boasts a user base of more than 40 million decision makers, making it an attractive platform for foreign intelligence services to leverage.¹⁵ The platform’s emphasis on professional connections rather than personal friendships makes it an ideal vehicle for exploitation.¹⁶ When accepted into someone’s public professional network, a virtual intelligence officer gains immediate cover and credibility. For example, the USAF confirmed that a “security specialist” engaged in a five-year correspondence with Mr. Dickson Yeo, a Singaporean national whose apprehension by US officials in 2020 shed light on this issue concerning the PRC.¹⁷ In an attempt to be helpful, “the security specialist recommended Mr. Yeo on LinkedIn in at least eight categories,” which helped further the PRC’s ability to headhunt individuals with key positions and sensitive knowledge.¹⁸

One of the immediate benefits of being accepted into a network of professionals or a professional community is the opportunity to gain valuable insights and information from discussion threads and shared articles posted on LinkedIn. This enables adversaries to remain informed about the latest perceptions, challenges, recommendations, and trends within the DOD community.

¹³ Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn.”

¹⁴ Aaltola, “Geostrategically Motivated Co-Option of Social Media”; and Danielle Wallace, “China’s ‘prolific’ Espionage Scheme Trying to ‘Headhunt’ British Politicians, Defense Officials, UK Gov’t Says,” *Fox News*, 17 September 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/>.

¹⁵ Aaltola, “Geostrategically Motivated Co-Option of Social Media.”

¹⁶ Beata Biały, “Social Media—From Social Exchange to Battlefield,” *Cyber Defense Review* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2017), 69–70.

¹⁷ Katrina Manson, Hannah Murphy, and Kadhim Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight on China’s Online Espionage,” *Financial Times*, 31 July 2020, <https://www.ft.com/>.

¹⁸ Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight”; and Wallace, “China’s ‘prolific’ Espionage Scheme.”

Furthermore, junior defense employees or service members, irrespective of rank, title, or position, often find themselves privy to critical military information and thus become targets. A striking example of China “reaching deep within the military ranks” to challenge US military supremacy occurred in 2023 when two junior Navy sailors were charged with allegedly spying for the PRC.¹⁹ These junior members possess intimate knowledge of weapons systems, comprehend the relative strengths and vulnerabilities of these systems, and are well-versed in organizational structures and chains of command.

Active military and civilian members, who have no intention of leaving the DOD in the foreseeable future, remain vulnerable to inadvertently aiding foreign adversaries through enticing consulting offers. A prime example is a seemingly innocuous request for a straightforward report. With a generous compensation package and the simplicity of the task, consultant reports become an avenue for malicious actors to get “a hook” into a potentially valuable source. Furthermore, “the activity itself—writing a short report—is not illegal in many Western countries if no secret or confidential information is revealed.”²⁰

However, active DOD members are prohibited from working for foreign governments as part of side employment. A guide from Joint Base San Antonio confirms that active, reserve, and guard Airmen are “ineligible for employment by foreign governments or foreign agencies.”²¹ Violating this rule, whether knowingly or unknowingly, can result in charges of espionage and treason.

Many former DOD members transition to roles within the US’s defense industrial base, leveraging their experience to contribute to the development of new and innovative weaponry. In 2022, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray disclosed that “the Bureau had more than 2,000 investigations involving Chinese attempts to steal U.S. technology, and that two such new cases are opened every day.”²²

Further research is necessary to ascertain the duration for which information and insights retain their value and accuracy. Nonetheless, two seasoned intelligence experts and faculty members at the Air War College, possessing extensive knowledge on espionage, have affirmed that even information dating back five years can

¹⁹ Nancy A. Youssef and Warren P. Strobel, “Navy Sailors Charged with Allegedly Spying for China,” *Wall Street Journal*, 4 August 2023, sec. Politics, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

²⁰ Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn”; and Aaltola, “Geostrategically Motivated Co-Option of Social Media,” 5–6.

²¹ Joint Base San Antonio Legal Assistance Office, “Off-Duty Employment,” *JBSA Jurist* 4, no. 3 (March 2018), 1, <https://www.jbsa.mil/>.

²² Youssef and Strobel, “Navy Sailors Charged with Allegedly Spying for China.”

remain highly valuable to adversaries in addressing their intelligence gaps.²³ With the targets of adversaries now evident, let us delve into their objectives.

Adversaries' Goals

Foreign adversaries engage in LinkedIn espionage as part of their efforts in the great-power competition to obtain information and strategic advantages. Over the past few decades, adversaries have meticulously analyzed US military capabilities, strategies, and advantages, beginning with the highly sophisticated operations facilitated by space assets, the digital/information domain, and precision bombing during the Persian Gulf War in the early 1990s. To remain competitive, challengers to the United States must consistently inform themselves about the US military and the myriad factors contributing to its success. Of particular interest to adversaries is any insight into the DOD's future force development, capabilities, and strategies for warfare. This encompasses information concerning US plans for defending Taiwan, for which "the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) has issued contracts to private Chinese companies to gather a range of open-source information," according to the threat-intelligence company Recorded Future.²⁴

Any insight obtained would facilitate the PLA's development of its "war plan" and its efforts to counter current and future US weapons and capabilities.²⁵ In line with this objective, adversaries seek to assess how their military capabilities stack up against those of the United States. Kevin Rudd, former Australian prime minister and current Australian ambassador to the United States, identifies several of these challenging-to-assess factors in his book *The Avoidable War*.²⁶ The PLA aims to understand the "relative sophistication and survivability of military platforms, systems, and weapons" to discover weaknesses it can attack and exploit. Furthermore, studying US "battlefield experience and training" will enable the PLA to formulate strategies for positioning and operating its forces in ways that catch the US military off guard.²⁷ Additionally, the PLA seeks to evaluate the United States' "robustness of command, control, communications, and intelligence systems for integrating and sustaining effective joint operations" to identify avenues for isolating, for instance, the US Navy and compelling it to engage in a weakened and disjointed

²³ Elizabeth Tilley and Charles Hans, class discussion on virtual espionage, Air War College, 15 September 2023.

²⁴ Julian E. Barnes, "China Investing in Open-Source Intelligence Collection on the U.S.," *New York Times*, 1 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

²⁵ Jeffrey Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community*, 7th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2016), 10.

²⁶ Kevin Rudd, *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022), 172–73.

²⁷ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 172.

manner.²⁸ The PRC considers various factors when determining the optimal time and location to act. These factors include the “ability to sustain military budgets over time, as well as the political support and willingness of Washington, Beijing, and relevant allied capitals to develop and maintain military forces.”²⁹ A significant aspect of the PRC’s calculations is the presence of nuclear-capable US forces and the “impact of nuclear deterrence in relation to any conventional conflict.”³⁰

The specific intelligence requirements become clearer following a comparative analysis of relative strengths. A comprehensive review of various books and articles detailing espionage efforts against US military weapon systems yields the following condensed list of sought-after intelligence, sensitive knowledge, and expertise:

1. Propulsion technology, structural designs, and electronics for current and future naval, aerial, and rotary-wing platforms.
2. Space systems for diverse military applications and the associated terrestrial and orbital infrastructure.
3. Advanced munitions technology.
4. Cyber offensive and defensive capabilities, as well as communication and computer technologies.
5. Various weapons’ underlying operating systems.³¹

Moreover, critical scientific research is poised to unlock breakthroughs that offer significant military advantages. Intelligence gathering efforts targeting research and development focus on hypersonics, thermodynamics, propulsion, robotics, AI, signal processing, quantum computing, supercomputing, nuclear energy, nanotechnology, semiconductors, and stealth technology.³² Notably, the DCSA identified half of these scientific domains in its 2023 report on targeted US technologies.

It comes as no surprise that the PRC shows a specific interest in the US capacity to project power across vast distances. In the event of a conflict between the United States and the PRC, their navies would play a pivotal role, as “the PRC sees the likelihood of US and China confrontation at sea.”³³ Hence, the PLA is

²⁸ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 172.

²⁹ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 172.

³⁰ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 172.

³¹ *Targeting U.S. Technologies*, 11; Youssef and Strobel, “Navy Sailors Charged with Allegedly Spying for China”; and Joel Brenner, *Glass Houses: Privacy, Secrecy, and Cyber Insecurity in a Transparent World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 74–75.

³² *Targeting U.S. Technologies*, 11; and Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China.”

³³ Brenner, *Glass Houses*, 75.

particularly keen on US Navy technologies, with a focus on quiet submarine propulsion, torpedoes, as well as carrier and destroyer technologies. Additionally, adversaries acknowledge the global reach of the USAF and therefore target fighter and bomber technologies. Consequently, individuals involved in the development, work, or support of platforms such as the F-35, B-21, and Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) are prime targets.

The desired information also encompasses a wealth of data on defense professionals. In 2020, the US Assistant Attorney General for the National Security Division underscored “Beijing’s appetite for large volumes of personal data, citing the 2015 OPM hack and the 2017 Equifax breach.”³⁴ A prime example is former Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) employee Ron Hansen, who was compromised by Chinese intelligence operatives to collect and compile information on his former colleagues and agency.³⁵ Having discussed the objectives of adversaries targeting the United States, the following section examines the repercussions should they succeed in their LinkedIn espionage efforts.

LinkedIn Espionage Impact

The repercussions for the nation and the individuals compromised by successful foreign adversary LinkedIn espionage operations are profound. The strength and national security of the United States rely on its ability to wield the most advanced, unparalleled technology and weaponry, often deploying them in ways that catch adversaries off guard. Achieving success in combat has always necessitated a technological edge and operational unpredictability. The warfighting concepts, technical innovations, and fielded capabilities of today and tomorrow have been shaped by hard-earned lessons, paid for with the sacrifice of precious lives, billions of taxpayer dollars, and extensive time investments. Effective intelligence utilization is pivotal, not only for enhancing national security but also for fiscal responsibility. As succinctly stated, “Intelligence can help save substantial sums of money by avoiding unnecessary research and development (R&D) and deployment programs.”³⁶ Adversaries engage in LinkedIn espionage to counter

³⁴ “CSIS: Notes from a CSIS Virtual Event - Countering Chinese Espionage,” *Targeted News Service*, 18 August 2020, <https://www.proquest.com/>.

³⁵ “Former Intelligence Officer Convicted of Attempted Espionage Sentenced to 10 Years in Federal Prison” (press release, Office of Public Affairs, US Department of Justice, 24 September 2019), <https://www.justice.gov/>; and Jeff Stone, “LinkedIn Is Becoming China’s Go-to Platform for Recruiting Foreign Spies,” *CyberScoop* (blog), 26 March 2019, <https://cyberscoop.com/>.

³⁶ Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community*, 10.

or replicate US capabilities at a fraction of the cost and with expediency, effectively shifting the burden onto American taxpayers.

Moreover, grave damage ensues when a high-value individual (HVI) is compromised and coerced into collaboration with the adversary, which represents the ultimate objective of LinkedIn espionage. The case of Kevin Mallory, a retired CIA officer initially contacted via LinkedIn, serves as a stark example of this danger. Despite identifying his Chinese contacts as intelligence officers, Mallory still conspired to commit espionage for the PRC.³⁷ Critical insights into US war plans and most cutting-edge scientific research will severely impact US military power. Consider the ramifications if the United States were to lose the race for AI and quantum computing because the PRC or Russia managed to bypass the safeguards of these R&D efforts. As emphasized, “Adversaries that can mitigate US systems’ effectiveness or deploy equal capabilities onto the battlefield will cost US and allied warfighter lives.”³⁸

It is noteworthy how strikingly similar the US F-22 and the PRC J-20 fighter jets appear in images. One repercussion of failing to effectively counter the threat of virtual espionage is that adversaries will eventually secure access to subject matter experts capable of providing technical insights into the United States’ most advanced weaponry and those under development. For instance, the PRC’s intelligence asset, Mr. Yeo, initiated contact over LinkedIn with an undisclosed individual facing financial difficulties who was involved in the F-35 program.³⁹ Additionally, when the PRC possesses planes and warships resembling those of the United States, they likely possess knowledge of US systems’ characteristics, while having “modified their own replicas in ways which the US military must guess at.”⁴⁰

LinkedIn espionage has the potential to empower adversaries to surpass the United States in existing technologies and outpace it in emerging research fields such as AI and quantum computing. Falling behind in these technological races would significantly impair the United States’ ability to wage future wars at the staggering pace necessary to overwhelm enemy forces. As highlighted, “Chinese intelligence services have made an art of exploiting the seam between the classified and the pre-classified, where technologies begin to emerge but under US rules are not yet military R&D.”⁴¹ The nation or alliance that harnesses quantum technol-

³⁷ Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China.”

³⁸ Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, “Counterintelligence - Best Practices for Cleared Industry,” 26.

³⁹ Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn.”

⁴⁰ Brenner, *Glass Houses*, 75.

⁴¹ Brenner, *Glass Houses*, 77.

ogy will swiftly gain access to knowledge and capabilities that were previously decades or even centuries away. This could position that country at the forefront of human civilization's history, potentially rendering it impossible for competitors to achieve parity, as they would possess the capability to impede and obstruct their progress toward the next level of technological advancement. Consequently, the nation's ability to safeguard its citizens and interests both domestically and internationally would be significantly compromised.

It is imperative to contemplate the ramifications for individuals and their families who fall victim to virtual espionage. Their lives will be thrown into disarray. According to 18 U.S.C § 2381, those found guilty of treason against the United States "shall suffer death, or shall be imprisoned not less than five years and fined under this title but not less than \$10,000; and shall be incapable of holding any office under the United States."⁴² Furthermore, individuals may endure professional and personal humiliation even in the absence of legal consequences. Their credibility and standing in the community may be irreparably tarnished. Moreover, their prospects for future employment will be severely limited, placing their current quality of life in jeopardy.

The Emoluments Clause of the Constitution extends to military retirees as well. It "prohibits receipt of consulting fees, gifts, travel expenses, honoraria, or salary by all retired military personnel, officer and enlisted, Regular and Reserve, from a foreign government unless Congressional consent is first obtained."⁴³ Additionally, individuals must exercise caution and refrain from entering into any agreement for compensation with a US company that may be offering services to a foreign government.⁴⁴

The following examples underscore the tangible consequences faced by individuals who have disclosed or attempted to disclose sensitive information, with four instances linked to the PRC and one to Russia. For instance, in January 2024, Navy Petty Officer "Thomas" Zhao was sentenced to two years and fined USD 5,500 for providing pictures and details of naval training and exercises, despite facing a potential 20-year sentence.⁴⁵ In 2022, Shapour Moinian, a former Army

⁴² US Congress, 18 U.S.C § 2381 Ch. 115: TREASON, SEDITION, AND SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES.

⁴³ DOD Standards of Conduct Office, "Department of Defense Standards of Conduct Office > DoD Personnel > Ethics Topics for DoD Personnel > Seeking and Post-Government Employment."

⁴⁴ Joint Base San Antonio Legal Assistance Office, "General Law Handouts A Tool for JBSA Separating and Retiring Employees (O-6 and below) Post-Government Employment Restrictions"; USAF Office of the General Counsel, "AFD-111021-024 Pre- and Post -Employment Restrictions For Separating and Retiring Air Force Personnel."

⁴⁵ Ives, "U.S. Navy Sailor Who Helped China Is Sentenced to 2 Years in Prison"; and Youssef and Strobel, "Navy Sailors Charged with Allegedly Spying for China."

helicopter pilot and defense contractor, received a 20-month sentence for divulging aviation-related information.⁴⁶ Similarly, in 2019, Ron Hansen, a former DIA case officer, was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison, despite facing a possible life sentence.⁴⁷ Also in 2019, Kevin Mallory, a retired CIA officer, was handed a 20-year prison term for colluding with Chinese espionage officers after experiencing financial difficulties and being contacted via LinkedIn.⁴⁸

Ongoing federal cases further underscore the severity of the consequences. For instance, Jareh Dalke, a former National Security Agency (NSA) employee accused of attempting to send classified documents to Russia, faces the death penalty, while Navy Petty Officer Second Class “Patrick” Wei, who received thousands of dollars from PRC intelligence for photos and videos, is potentially facing a life sentence.⁴⁹

It is crucial to recognize that even spouses and family members of current or former DOD members can be targeted. For example, the wife of an unnamed US Army officer assigned to the Pentagon became entangled when Mr. Yeo sent money to her bank account for services her husband purportedly rendered after being recruited via LinkedIn.⁵⁰ With an awareness of the repercussions of LinkedIn espionage, the subsequent section will delve into the feasibility of espionage and social engineering.

Espionage and Psychology

Foreign adversaries engage in both traditional espionage and exploit the psychological aspects of social engineering when targeting current and former DOD members through LinkedIn. Espionage constitutes a fundamental component of adversaries’ spying and intelligence-gathering activities. It encompasses individuals who divulge sensitive information or secrets to a foreign government or adversary regarding the organization they are affiliated with and have access to. As noted, “Espionage is largely uncodified in international law.”⁵¹ Individuals who engage

⁴⁶ Youssef and Strobel, “Navy Sailors Charged with Allegedly Spying for China.”

⁴⁷ Stone, “LinkedIn Is Becoming China’s Go-to Platform”; and “Former Intelligence Officer Convicted of Attempted Espionage” (press release).

⁴⁸ Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China”; and Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight.”

⁴⁹ “Former NSA Employee from Colorado Pleads Guilty to Trying to Send Classified Documents to Russia,” *CBS News*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/>; Kevin Johnson, “Ex-NSA Staffer Charged with Espionage, Allegedly Sought Thousands to Relieve Crushing Debt,” *USA Today*, 29 September 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/>; and Youssef and Strobel, “Navy Sailors Charged with Allegedly Spying for China.”

⁵⁰ Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn”; and Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight.”

⁵¹ Lester Godefrey, “Shape or Deter?: Managing Cyber-Espionage Threats to National Security Interests,” *Studies in Intelligence* 66, no. 1 (March 2022), 2, <https://www.cia.gov/>.

in espionage on behalf of a foreign entity are commonly referred to as *agents* or *informants*, with the latter being the prevalent term used in the United States, while the adversary is typically termed the *handler* in this context.⁵²

HUMINT stands as a pivotal element in espionage operations. It entails the recruitment of foreign nationals to gather intelligence against their own country—a process that historically necessitated approximately seven years for HUMINT officers to attain proficiency.⁵³ However, what the article refers to as *virtual espionage* now enables the traditional facets of espionage and social engineering to be executed through professional social networking platforms in the digital era. This obviates certain traditional training prerequisites, such as proficiency in weaponry and communication techniques, thereby reducing the time required for intelligence operatives to develop their skills. Moreover, virtual espionage is intricately linked to this phenomenon, consequently mitigating some of the conventional risk factors associated with espionage, such as the prospect of apprehension in a foreign jurisdiction. The arrest of an enemy spy on foreign soil carries political repercussions that are no longer pertinent. Allegations of LinkedIn espionage, emanating from the safety of a desk in China or elsewhere, can be readily refuted.⁵⁴

The traditional informant or spy acquisition cycle comprises five distinct steps:

1. Identifying individuals with access to desired information. In the realm of LinkedIn espionage, consideration should also be given to identifying individuals with valuable social network connections and credibility.
2. Assessing their susceptibility to recruitment.
3. Recruiting or presenting a pitch.
4. Managing the informant or asset.
5. Terminating the relationship, if necessary.⁵⁵

In relation to steps 1 and 2, preparation for social engineering commences with thorough research of the target once an individual has been selected, gathering as much information as possible through various channels. This facilitates the crafting of a tailored solicitation approach, which is then deployed against the target. Additionally, it enables the effective exploitation of individuals who take the bait.⁵⁶

⁵² “How Spies Operate,” MI5, n.d., <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/>.

⁵³ Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 7th ed. (Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2017), 139.

⁵⁴ Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 143; and Gareth Corfield, “Why LinkedIn Is a Snooper’s Paradise,” *The Telegraph*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>.

⁵⁵ Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 138.

⁵⁶ Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 46.

Social engineering plays a central role in the manipulation and enticement of current and former DOD members. Cybersecurity specialist Raef Meeuwisse, in his book *How to Hack a Human: Cybersecurity for the Mind*, dissects social engineering through what he terms a “human hacking kill chain,” emphasizing that “the word *engineer* suggests an amount of science” is being employed.⁵⁷ In espionage recruitment, the objective is to deceive without arousing the target’s suspicion, as any sense of distrust may deter them from connecting on LinkedIn or providing information.⁵⁸ Therefore, establishing credibility and trust with the target by fabricating an identity constitutes a crucial initial objective of a social engineering operation and forms part of the first step in making contact through a tailored message.⁵⁹ The efficacy of the attack is heightened when accompanied by bait or “offering the target an item he/she will perceive to be valuable, likely notice,” and desire to obtain.⁶⁰

Money stands out as one of the most prevalent and enticing motivations for targets, as evidenced by its utilization in the attempted approach against me on LinkedIn. Indeed, it is crucial to highlight the acronym MICE, which stands for money, ideology, compromise, or ego. This acronym is frequently employed to categorize the motivational factors that render individuals susceptible to disclosing information or being recruited for espionage.⁶¹

Foreign intelligence services exhibit great proficiency in exploiting psychological factors to manipulate motivations, emotions, and decisions. They employ tactics such as bait, time pressure, and fear of missing out.⁶² Nudge theory, derived from psychology, “looks at how behaviors and decision-making of individuals can be substantially influenced by subtle and often indirect methods.”⁶³ A potent and ingenious strategy to circumvent psychological defenses involves engineering the situation to appear and flow entirely naturally. This is achieved by incorporating real information that resonates with and is pertinent to the target, acquired through research conducted during the preparation phase. Consequently, the target feels

⁵⁷ Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 26.

⁵⁸ Perry, “Ethics in the Recruiting and Handling,” 71.

⁵⁹ Kevin Mitnick and William L. Simon, *The Art of Intrusion: The Real Stories behind the Exploits of Hackers, Intruders, & Deceivers* (Indianapolis: Wiley, 2005), 46.

⁶⁰ Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 20–30–46.

⁶¹ Michael Smith, *The Anatomy of a Spy: A History of Espionage and Betrayal* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2020), 10; and Brenner, *Glass Houses*, 79.

⁶² Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 28–29–46.

⁶³ Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 47.

as though they are experiencing a typical outcome resulting from a genuine and related situation.⁶⁴

Part of the manipulation process involves making the target feel valued, a tactic achieved through “ego gratification.”⁶⁵ The adversary will convey to the individual their intelligence and knowledge, express admiration for various attributes, and convey gratitude for the opportunity to receive assistance from such an expert. Psychologists have identified numerous benefits individuals derive from helping others, including empowerment and bolstered self-esteem.⁶⁶

Additionally, favorability bias plays a significant role and is employed through name-dropping to present the intelligence officer as part of a trusted group. Targets tend to respond more positively to individuals within their own circle or if they perceive the attacker to be associated with someone they like or admire.⁶⁷ For instance, Mr. Yeo, the PRC’s Singaporean intelligence asset, showcased his credentials on LinkedIn as a political risk analyst with connections to hundreds of policy makers in the US capital.⁶⁸

Intelligence services can utilize transactions already completed with a target for implicit blackmail, as accepting payment often signifies a point of no return.⁶⁹ A successful contact initiated by the adversary with a target via LinkedIn can swiftly escalate into blackmail before the target even discerns any suspicion. Foreign officers will endeavor to exploit any communication and possibly fabricate a narrative to intimidate and further manipulate their victims. This tactic is inherent to their espionage practices. The subsequent focus of discussion is how LinkedIn is utilized to identify targets.

Locating Targets on LinkedIn

Foreign adversaries leverage LinkedIn due to its low cost and risk. LinkedIn, a US-based company, serves as a platform for professionals worldwide to connect, expand their networks, and advance their careers or secure lucrative business opportunities. This platform is particularly attractive to foreign intelligence services because many current and former DOD professionals, including high-ranking officials, utilize it to promote themselves and their networks.

⁶⁴ Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 46.

⁶⁵ Brenner, *Glass Houses*, 79.

⁶⁶ Mitnick and Simon, *The Art of Intrusion*, 235.

⁶⁷ Mitnick and Simon, *The Art of Intrusion*, 237; Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 115.

⁶⁸ Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight.”

⁶⁹ Aaltola, “Geostrategically Motivated Co-Option of Social Media,” 6; and Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight.”

For a nominal fee of USD 180 per month, an espionage officer can purchase access to “LinkedIn Recruiter Lite,” offering advanced search capabilities and automated recommendations tailored to the desired type of professional.⁷⁰ Following his 2020 apprehension by the United States, Mr. Yeo noted the significant assistance provided by an unseen ally—the LinkedIn algorithm—in targeting American military personnel for information and recruitment. The algorithm suggested contacts aligned with his prior LinkedIn searches and connections.⁷¹ Foreign intelligence services can access this platform, even if it’s restricted in their country, using workarounds as needed. This method aligns with their operational tactics.

There is a notable correlation between individuals targeted on LinkedIn and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) cyber hack in 2014, which compromised extensive data on over 22 million Americans with security clearances. China admitted the breach originated from within China but attributed it to criminal elements.⁷² This highlights how an adversary’s broader intelligence operations can facilitate more targeted approaches on LinkedIn. In 2018, following the significant 2017 breach of Equifax’s data on Americans, US counterintelligence chief William Evanina cautioned about “super aggressive” actions by Beijing on the Microsoft-owned LinkedIn platform.⁷³

In addition to fabricating fake identities, individuals engaging in human hacking also masquerade as major US corporations to enhance their credibility. For example, counterfeit LinkedIn accounts have “impersonated an HR manager from Collins Aerospace, a major US supplier of aerospace and defense products,” as well as HR personnel from General Dynamics.⁷⁴ These tactics aim to establish various types of professional relationships, potentially luring experts in critical fields through false job opportunities.⁷⁵

AI plays a crucial role in assisting intelligence officers in crafting sophisticated fake profiles by ensuring proper language usage in profiles and correspondence. While ethnic Chinese individuals in the West were previously more targeted,

⁷⁰ “LinkedIn Recruiter Lite,” LinkedIn, n.d., <https://business.linkedin.com/>.

⁷¹ Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight”; and Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn.”

⁷² Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn”; Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 502; and Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 163.

⁷³ Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn”; and Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China.”

⁷⁴ Dominik Breitenbacher and Kaspars Osis, “Operation In(Ter)ception: Targeted Attacks against European Aerospace and Military Companies” (white paper, ESET Research, June 2020,) 2, <https://web-assets.esetstatic.com/>.

⁷⁵ *Targeting U.S. Technologies*, 11.

virtual espionage aided by AI has expanded the scope of potential targets.⁷⁶ AI will further facilitate LinkedIn espionage on a larger scale, allowing for the continuous maintenance of fake profiles, despite LinkedIn's efforts to block and remove such accounts. The graph below, based on LinkedIn's transparency report data, illustrates the escalating trend of fake accounts being proactively restricted by platform administrators. This trend surged from 4.4 million at the close of 2021 to 15.1 million in the first half of 2023.

Millions of fake LinkedIn accounts are taken down each year

Amount of fake profiles proactively restricted by LinkedIn in the first half of each year (millions)

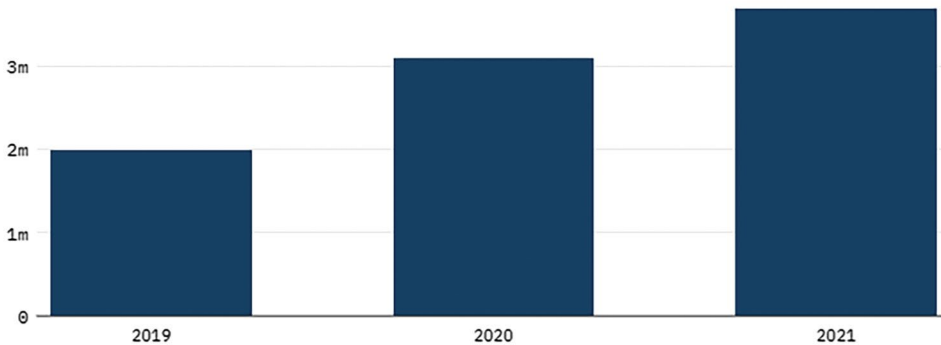


Figure 1. Millions of fake LinkedIn accounts are taken down each year

Moreover, the widespread use of smartphones and mobile capabilities has heightened LinkedIn's accessibility, increasing the likelihood of ensnaring a target. As one expert notes, "The leap into mobile technology, has had a tremendous influence on human behavior."⁷⁷ Adversaries exploit this by sending out numerous approaches simultaneously and patiently waiting for someone to take the lure.⁷⁸ Therefore, the question arises: How can this threat be effectively countered?

Defeating this Threat

Countering the threat posed by foreign adversaries attempting to recruit current and former DOD members via LinkedIn is both crucial and feasible. However,

⁷⁶ Aaltola, "Geostrategically Motivated Co-Option of Social Media," 8.

⁷⁷ Bialy, "Social Media," 86.

⁷⁸ Corfield, "Why LinkedIn Is a Snooper's Paradise."

there is currently a lack of focused training, education, and mainstream awareness regarding this threat. Numerous articles and examples highlighting the risk of virtual espionage on LinkedIn support the findings of a study indicating that “LinkedIn members have been found to be significantly more likely than Facebook users to allow public access to their professional and educational data.”⁷⁹ Mr. Yeo recounted to the *Financial Times* that “several former military commanders and specialists at the Pentagon accepted his connection requests without thinking.”⁸⁰ Despite these risks, LinkedIn’s professional community policy fails to offer practical recommendations for safeguarding against exploitation by fake profiles or falling victim to deception.

This article’s top recommendation for countering virtual espionage involves launching a focused campaign by the US government aimed at turning adversaries’ efforts against them and inflicting significant costs. This campaign would involve incentivizing current and former DOD members to report any suspicious contacts or solicitations to law enforcement. In exchange for their assistance in thwarting the adversary’s espionage attempts, these individuals would receive monetary compensation. Law enforcement authorities would then pass on these reports to US counterintelligence agencies, which would collaborate closely with the targets. Through this collaboration, US counterintelligence agencies would exploit the activities of foreign intelligence services, including causing financial losses to adversaries by enabling the targets to receive and retain the money offered by adversaries. This campaign directly addresses the motivation of money that adversaries exploit to compromise individuals.

Moreover, everyone should exercise extreme caution when receiving new connection requests, particularly if they appear overly appealing; chances are, they are deceptive. The process of manipulating individuals often begins with a connection request, making it imperative for the community of current and former defense professionals to adopt specific measures before accepting such invitations. Firstly, individuals they do not know seeking to connect should have a mutual contact who can facilitate an introduction. Secondly, this introduction should be accompanied by relevant context explaining the reason for the connection request. Implementing these measures would signify a positive shift in the professional network-

⁷⁹ Mohammed Khaled Alotaibi, “The Influence of Personal Characteristics and Other Factors on the Susceptibility of Public Sector Employees to Cyber-Social Engineering through LinkedIn: A Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Study” (thesis, Trinity College Dublin. School of Computer Science & Statistics. Discipline of Computer Science, 2021), 4, <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/>.

⁸⁰ Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight.”

ing behavior and norms within the defense community, bolstering collective resilience against virtual espionage.

Unsolicited consulting offers may appear innocuous on the surface, but receiving them unexpectedly from unfamiliar entities should raise concerns. When suspicions are aroused, it is crucial to promptly reach out to the OSI or other relevant federal law enforcement agencies within the DOD, such as the FBI. It is advisable to notify authorities if further investigation into an unsolicited consulting contact reveals signs of a fabricated persona or an illegitimate consulting firm.

The 2023 *NCS* highlights the imperative to develop and deploy “enhanced digital identity solutions,” building upon the ongoing digital identity research program led by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to fortify digital credentials.⁸¹ These initiatives represent significant strides by the government and will play a crucial role in alerting social media users to fraudulent or deceptive networking attempts. However, the *NCS* does not explicitly address the threat of virtual espionage, although it could be inferred from passages concerning social networks. It is essential to explicitly acknowledge the danger posed by virtual espionage in the *NCS*, particularly while technical solutions are being developed, with specific mention of platforms like LinkedIn where such activities are prevalent.

On the other hand, the 2023 *DOD Cyber Strategy Summary* acknowledges the threat of virtual espionage and includes a line of effort (LOE) titled “Build Enduring Advantages in Cyberspace.” This LOE encompasses initiatives aimed at developing, securing funding for, and implementing educational curricula at various levels of professional military and civilian education, including courses for General Officers and Senior Executive Service (SES) personnel.⁸² Despite this recognition, the current training efforts within the LOE do not explicitly address the active DOD force’s susceptibility to outside solicitations, side employment, or post-DOD work, whether in consulting or other capacities. It is imperative that the training efforts under the LOE be expanded to encompass these aspects and adequately prepare personnel for such threats.

Research and discussions underscore the importance of addressing the threat of virtual espionage within the DOD, with the “DOD Annual Cyber Awareness” computer-based training being identified as the closest existing framework for such education. However, it is evident that the current training falls significantly short in this regard. While the DOD-wide cyber awareness training adequately

⁸¹ *National Cybersecurity Strategy*, 26.

⁸² *US Department of Defense Summary Cyber Strategy* (Washington: DOD, 2023), 13–14, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

covers topics such as protecting personally identifiable information (PII) and operational security (OPSEC), it lacks specific education on virtual espionage targeting members through platforms like LinkedIn.

There is an urgent need to enhance the DOD Annual Cyber Awareness training by incorporating a dedicated section on virtual espionage, along with relevant vignettes illustrating common tactics and scenarios encountered on professional networking sites. Additionally, current DOD members would benefit from periodic counterintelligence training stand-downs, which can enhance their awareness and ability to identify suspicious activities or patterns indicative of an attack. The more informed and vigilant personnel are, the better equipped investigators will be to detect and mitigate potential threats.⁸³

It is imperative to improve the existing guidelines governing outside employment for both active-duty DOD members and former personnel, to bolster efforts to mitigate threats. Clarity and consistency regarding permissible and restricted activities should be readily accessible through a simple online search. However, during research for this article, it became apparent that this information was not readily available at the top of search results.

An immediate remedy is to prioritize the dissemination of standardized guidance to ensure that pertinent information appears prominently in search results. Additionally, active military members seeking supplementary employment should seek additional guidance from local legal offices, while their current supervisory chain is responsible for addressing any questions or concerns related to outside employment. However, it has become evident from discussions that there is a pressing need for standardized protocols across all sectors, including civilians and contractors. As outlined in the Joint Ethics Regulations (JER 2-303), “commanders can require any DoD employee to report outside employment ... and a commanding officer or supervisor can prohibit any off-duty employment if he or she believes the proposed activity will detract from readiness or will pose a security risk.”⁸⁴

A standardized questionnaire form should be implemented to ensure thorough review and assessment by the First Sergeant or their designated representative, aimed at identifying any potential espionage concerns involving military personnel. This form must include a legal disclaimer and a reminder of the serious repercussions of neglecting to conduct comprehensive background research on the prospective employer. It should also emphasize the importance of promptly reporting any

⁸³ Mitnick and Simon, *The Art of Deception*, 305.

⁸⁴ Department of Defense Standards of Conducts Office, “Joint Ethics Regulation on Outside Activities,” November 2013, 4, <https://dodsoco.ogc.osd.mil/>; and Joint Base San Antonio Legal Assistance Office, “Off-Duty Employment,” 1.

attempted espionage. Similarly, local Civilian Personnel Offices should require and oversee a similar process for civilians, while contracting officer representatives should manage it for DOD contractors. Enhanced oversight of outside employment should be complemented by an annual review of the outside employment program, integrated into a commander's programs as part of the Management Internal Control Toolkit (MICT) USAF inspection system.

It is important to note that while reviewing guidance from the DOD Standards of Conduct Office and sampling guidance from various installations for separating or retiring military personnel, no specific instructions were found for former DOD members who separated from service before reaching retirement eligibility. These individuals must also be mindful of the legal ramifications of providing valuable insights to foreign entities, potentially aiding adversaries in their intelligence efforts. The legal landscape surrounding non-retirees and former civilian retirees of the DOD remains unclear, necessitating explicit codification of rules, laws, and associated consequences in this area.

An area of notable concern with "no search results" pertains to employment restrictions for current and former holders of top-secret clearances. To further mitigate the risk of espionage, it is imperative for lawmakers and DOD authorities to address guidelines and penalties concerning individuals who currently hold or previously held such clearances.

Consideration should be given to implementing a ban preventing current and former DOD members from publicly disclosing their clearance status. This measure would disrupt foreign intelligence officers' ability to exploit LinkedIn algorithms for searching or receiving suggested contacts based on users' security clearance information. However, job seekers would still be able to disclose their clearance status during formal resume submissions or interviews. Such a policy could significantly enhance security measures and safeguard against potential espionage threats.

Another essential recommendation in countering the threat is to ensure that TAP offices inform separating and retiring DOD members about the potential risks. This information should also be integrated into the procedures of Civilian Personnel Offices and CORs for individuals leaving DOD-affiliated employment. Additionally, a valuable tool is to include susceptibility tests for social engineering attacks as part of routine security assessments for DOD members.⁸⁵

Members should be informed to anticipate these evaluations periodically, fostering heightened awareness and sensitivity to potential vulnerabilities. This proactive

⁸⁵ Mitnick and Simon, *The Art of Intrusion*, 238; Mitnick and Simon, *The Art of Deception*, 262.

approach will contribute to a stronger defense against such threats, as individuals will be better prepared to identify and address potential weaknesses.

Another strategy to expose illicit actors involves drawing parallels with adversary offensive cyber operations. Foreign espionage officers may find it cumbersome to create and manage numerous fake personas or companies, leading them to reuse the same identities.⁸⁶ Identifying such indicators can be instrumental in identifying malicious activity and thwarting espionage attempts.

Encouraging progress has been made in addressing this issue. LinkedIn has engaged in discussions with US law enforcement agencies regarding Chinese espionage activities on the platform.⁸⁷ Additionally, there is a helpful app called “Think Before You Link” that is accessible to LinkedIn users. Sponsored by the United Kingdom’s National Protective Security Authority, this app is designed to aid individuals in recognizing fake profiles on LinkedIn. It offers education on identifying indicators of fake profiles and includes a profile reviewer feature. This valuable tool is also available for use in the United States.⁸⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, LinkedIn espionage poses a significant threat to national security. Virtual espionage is characterized by its low cost and risk, as it bypasses traditional clandestine officer training requirements such as weapons training and specialized communication techniques. This is because LinkedIn provides a platform for attempting to recruit foreign nationals to steal secrets without the need for such training. Moreover, LinkedIn espionage eliminates the risk of these virtual intelligence officers being apprehended in foreign territory. The extent of this problem, as highlighted by US and other Western government officials, demands increased attention and action from policy makers, the DOD, and the defense industrial base to safeguard the resilience of both former and current DOD members.

The DOD continues to bolster its physical and increasingly sophisticated technical security measures, posing challenges to foreign spies seeking to acquire intelligence, defense plans, and technology. However, hackers targeting human vulnerabilities seek ways to bypass these robust defenses, recognizing that deceiving current or former DOD members can be a successful tactic.⁸⁹ Our adversar-

⁸⁶ Timo Steffens, *Attribution of Advanced Persistent Threats: How to Identify the Actors behind Cyber-Espionage* (Berlin: Springer Vieweg, 2020), 148.

⁸⁷ Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn”; and Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China.”

⁸⁸ Afiq Fitri, “MI5 and FBI Sound the Alarm on Online Espionage with LinkedIn a Prime Target,” *New Media Statesman Group*, 19 May 2022, <https://newstatesmanmedia.com/>.

⁸⁹ Mitnick and Simon, *The Art of Deception*, 7.

ies rely on compromising US and Western defense professionals to commit treason, whether through unwitting cooperation or coercion. As Meeuwisse states, “Our nervous system contains many prewired mechanisms that operate in a certain way, whether or not we consciously approve of these actions.”⁹⁰ This explains why individuals are often inclined to say yes to requests from people they like or to accept LinkedIn requests from individuals who appear credible and trustworthy, especially if endorsed by a mutual connection.⁹¹ Psychology elucidates why individuals may be susceptible to requests from those who project trustworthiness, honesty, or attractiveness.

Some current and former DOD members inadvertently expose themselves by providing detailed information about their work history and clearance levels on LinkedIn, more so than they would on other online platforms.⁹² As one observer noted, “In a bygone era, publicly advertising oneself as a holder of such clearances amounted to asking for it to be withdrawn.”⁹³ When this information is coupled with the vast amounts of personal data held by commercial companies, it allows foreign intelligence services to develop a comprehensive psychographic profile of an individual.

Chinese intelligence targets individuals across the DOD spectrum, from high-clearance senior officials to lower-tier and early-career personnel. The ongoing exploitation of LinkedIn and the recent 2023 case involving two young Navy Sailors allegedly engaged in espionage highlight the statement made by Senator Mark Warner (D-VA), the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, in 2018, underscoring “the length to which Chinese intelligence will go, and the 21st Century counter-intelligence challenges.”⁹⁴

Despite attempts by other countries like Russia, Iran, and North Korea, China poses the greatest threat for LinkedIn exploits.⁹⁵ China demonstrates a high level of comfort with espionage through various means, as evidenced by the numerous mass cyberattacks attributed to the country.⁹⁶ Intelligence agencies globally, particularly in the West, are concerned about China’s “increasingly astute online espionage efforts,” with LinkedIn being a prominent platform for such activities.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Meeuwisse, *How to Hack a Human*, 49.

⁹¹ Mitnick and Simon, *The Art of Intrusion*, 236.

⁹² Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China”; and Corfield, “Why LinkedIn Is a Snooper’s Paradise.”

⁹³ Corfield, “Why LinkedIn Is a Snooper’s Paradise.”

⁹⁴ Youssef and Strobel, “Navy Sailors Charged with Allegedly Spying for China”; and Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China.”

⁹⁵ Ponniah, “How a Chinese Agent Used LinkedIn”; and Strobel and Landay, “Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China.”

⁹⁶ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*, 292.

⁹⁷ Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, “LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight.”

US intelligence services are already cautioning their current and former officials about this threat.⁹⁸ The DOD must follow suit, with a specific focus on individuals' date range of separation, rank held, last position, overall assignments history, clearance status, and unique information exposure.

Potential counterarguments exist against concerns regarding foreign adversaries attempting to recruit current and former DOD members using LinkedIn. Some may argue that espionage over LinkedIn may be less of a concern than portrayed because most current and former defense professionals are likely to quickly identify and avoid such traps. Additionally, the DOD does not prohibit the use of LinkedIn and ensures that its personnel are trained in social media usage and obligated to protect sensitive defense information.⁹⁹ Moreover, sharing personal experiences in an unclassified context, such as on professional networking sites, is common and is not currently perceived as a significant threat.

Furthermore, concerns may not be warranted because LinkedIn actively identifies and removes fake accounts and collaborates with various government agencies worldwide to counter virtual espionage.¹⁰⁰ For these reasons, some individuals might believe that the danger posed by LinkedIn espionage is low.

Finally, it is worth noting that William Evanina, the former head of national counterintelligence for the United States from 2014 to 2021, was the first and last senior official to receive focused media attention in 2018 regarding espionage activity on LinkedIn targeting American military and government professionals. He publicly identified China as the perpetrator. However, it is essential for this issue to receive regular emphasis in the mainstream media, as it represents a significant threat to maintaining the US competitive stance in great-power competition. Evanina's media push occurred more than five years ago, highlighting the need for continuous attention to this matter. 🌐

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⁹⁸ Strobel and Landay, "Exclusive—U.S. Accuses China."

⁹⁹ Manson, Murphy, and Shubber, "LinkedIn Spy Scandal Shines Spotlight."

¹⁰⁰ Corfield, "Why LinkedIn Is a Snooper's Paradise."

Disentangling from Nuclear Superiority-Brinkmanship Theory

Combating a Legacy of Bootstrapping toward Armageddon

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Abstract

This article evaluates the theory of nuclear superiority-brinkmanship proposed by Matthew Kroenig, highlighting its fatal flaws through historical evidence and strategic analysis. It emphasizes the risks of reigniting an unsustainable arms race due to the US legacy of pursuing technological developments without a cohesive strategy, known as “bootstrapping.” Assessing the impracticality of limited nuclear war and the importance of secure second-strike capabilities, it advocates for a modern US nuclear deterrent based on a balanced force of advanced nuclear systems, complemented by robust conventional capabilities and infrastructure. Prioritizing credible deterrence over compellence aligns with national interests and reduces the risk of unintentional nuclear conflict. Pursuing Kroenig’s flawed theory, given its high costs and potential catastrophic consequences, is deemed unwise for guiding US nuclear strategy.

Few policy decisions carry higher stakes than establishing and maintaining a nuclear force posture. It is essential to acknowledge that preventing nuclear Armageddon cannot be achieved by merely returning weaponized nuclear material to Pandora’s box. Additionally, possessing nuclear weapons seems to reflect Thucydides’ observation that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”¹ Matthew Kroenig further developed this notion, arguing that “a robust nuclear force reduces a state’s expected cost of nuclear war, increasing its resolve in high-stakes crises, providing it with coercive bargaining leverage, and enhancing nuclear deterrence.”² Many within the US defense establishment praise Kroenig’s ideas and their potential to achieve both compellent and deterrent objectives globally.³ The validation of superiority-brinkmanship at the highest levels of the USAF is evident in the

¹ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 2008), 352.

² Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

³ Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, 3-4.

Chief of Staff's reading list, which prominently features *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, without offering a corresponding counterargument.⁴ Despite Kroenig's assertions and senior-level endorsement, the benefits of maintaining raw numerical nuclear superiority cannot ultimately outweigh the associated costs and potential negative consequences.

Regrettably, the models supporting superiority-brinkmanship are reductionistic, and relevant case studies provide insufficient evidence for the viability of extended deterrence and compellence.⁵ Nevertheless, this does not suggest that nuclear weapons have no role in U.S. security. Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrman offer a more robust methodology, validating the clear link between deploying sufficiently capable nuclear forces and deterring enemy attacks on the homeland.⁶ Therefore, it is crucial for the U.S. to allocate appropriate resources to maintain a modern and credible nuclear deterrent. However, formulating a coherent and effective nuclear policy necessitates defining key terms. To this end, exposing the fatal flaws of superiority-brinkmanship theory helps delineate what constitutes a sufficient nuclear force. Furthermore, highlighting connections to the US legacy of bootstrapping reveals factors shaping current nuclear policy and illuminates pitfalls that may limit the scope of potential new strategies. Finally, a critical evaluation of antithetical strategic camps exposes the risks of attempting to engage in a limited nuclear war and the mutability of weapons systems used as a secure second strike, offering insights into what a modern and credible nuclear deterrent must encompass.

Fatal Flaws of Superiority-Brinkmanship Theory

Kroenig's superiority-brinkmanship theory suffers from two fundamental flaws. Firstly, the models employed to validate his theory oversimplify superiority and its connections to coercion. Kroenig posited that "nuclear inferior opponents are less likely to initiate a military challenge and more likely to back down if the crisis escalates."⁷ He contended that the greater the power asymmetry, the greater the likelihood of bargaining occurring below the threshold of military action.⁸ To quantify this, Kroenig defined superiority based on raw stockpile size, arguing that

⁴ "Professional Reading Lists," Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) Reading List, 2024, <https://afri.libguides.com/>.

⁵ David Logan, "The Nuclear Balance is What States Make of It," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (Spring 2022), 184–85, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

⁶ Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 17.

⁷ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 4.

⁸ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 133.

“there is not a better [measure].”⁹ However, David C. Logan exposed the fallacy of measuring superiority in this manner by examining the US stockpile in 1966. That year, although the United States possessed 11,232 strategic warheads, “barely half of which were assessed as loaded on delivery vehicles.”¹⁰ Moreover, Logan refuted the notion that raw values were adequate proxies for more operational variables—such as delivery vehicles—demonstrating a clear lack of correlation between their quantities and raw stockpile values.¹¹

However, acknowledging that nuclear superiority is more nuanced than stockpile numbers does not inherently discredit Kroenig’s theory. Rather, it necessitates a reevaluation of his models. Logan undertook this task, and his subsequent data indicated “that nuclear superiority was not a significant factor in crisis outcomes.”¹² Similarly, Logan reexamined Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann’s models to verify their assertion that “nuclear weapons support primarily defensive—not offensive—objectives.”¹³ The outcome of this reassessment validated the conclusion that “there is little evidence suggesting a role for the nuclear balance in the outcomes of either interstate crises or compellent threats.”¹⁴ This analysis also supported Robert Jervis’s argument that possessing a larger nuclear stockpile than an adversary does not provide advantages because “deterrence comes from having enough weapons to destroy the other’s cities, [which] is an absolute, not a relative [capability].”¹⁵ Jervis further cautioned against the fervor for superiority, citing the Japanese decision to go to war in 1941 as evidence that “superior military capability [did] not guarantee deterrence.”¹⁶

The second fatal flaw in Kroenig’s theory lies in the assumption of a shared belief and understanding of the relative nuclear balance during times of crisis. Managing risk and escalation during a nuclear crisis becomes untenable without timely knowledge, as disagreement about which side would prevail leaves little basis for nonkinetic adjudication.¹⁷ However, the US history for estimating enemy force size undermines the feasibility of possessing the necessary knowledge when it is most needed. For instance, US intelligence discovered after the Cold War that

⁹ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 168.

¹⁰ Logan, “The Nuclear Balance is What States Make of It,” 182.

¹¹ Logan, “The Nuclear Balance is What States Make of It,” 184–85.

¹² Logan, “The Nuclear Balance is What States Make of It,” 190–92.

¹³ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 17.

¹⁴ Logan, “The Nuclear Balance is What States Make of It,” 192.

¹⁵ Robert Jervis, “Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn’t Matter,” *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (Winter 1979–1980), 618, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁶ Jervis, “Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn’t Matter,” 633.

¹⁷ Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, 132.

their estimates for Soviet ICBMs were frequently off by as much as 20 percent.¹⁸ Furthermore, this challenge is compounded when adversaries do not even agree on what constitutes nuclear superiority. A notable instance is the India–Pakistan conflicts, where India likely possessed the larger stockpile, yet Pakistan “boasted that their weaponry and command and control systems were superior.”¹⁹ However, neither country was likely aware of the relative stockpile sizes during the conflict.²⁰ These two fatal flaws in the foundation of superiority-brinkmanship theory elucidate why its adoption is ill-advised.

Connection to US Legacy of Nuclear Bootstrapping

The deficiencies within Kroenig’s superiority-brinkmanship theory extend beyond theoretical inconsistencies; its underlying impulses have permeated the legacy of US nuclear policy. However, the proliferation of large numbers of nuclear weapons has not necessarily stemmed from a deliberate policy decision. David Alan Rosenberg identified a historical precedent, which he derisively termed bootstrapping: the Strategic Air Command (SAC) practice of utilizing perceived increases in adversarial capability to justify extravagant escalatory spending.²¹ Kroenig attempted to argue that his theory did not inevitably lead to similar arms races, yet tacitly acknowledged a strong corollary trend by conceding that “winning [them] is sometimes necessary.”²² The origin of this trend is observable in US policy shortly after Germany’s surrender in May 1945. Germany’s defeat prompted Pres. Harry S. Truman to journey to Potsdam with the objective of aiding the Allied establishment of a postwar structure.²³ Nevertheless, World War II persisted in the Pacific, allowing Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer and his team to continue their sprint toward testing the first nuclear weapon.

While in Potsdam, news from New Mexico reached President Truman; the team at Los Alamos had succeeded, and the United States officially became the first nuclear-capable nation. The enormity of this new reality was captured in the president’s diary entry on 17 July 1945: “We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction [sic] prophesied in

¹⁸ Logan, “The Nuclear Balance is What States Make of It,” 195.

¹⁹ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 153.

²⁰ Logan, “The Nuclear Balance is What States Make of It,” 197.

²¹ David A. Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960,” *International Security* 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983), 22–23, 38, <https://doi.org/>.

²² Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, 143.

²³ Sean L. Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare: Scientists, Soldiers, Civilians, and American Nuclear Targeting, 1940–1945,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 3 (June 2007), 501–02, <https://doi.org/>.

the Euphrates Valley Era.”²⁴ President Truman’s portrayal of the bomb’s creation as a fortuitous discovery, with profound potential for cataclysm, is instructive for comprehending the origins of U.S. nuclear strategy. From 1940 to 1974, America’s inconsistent engagement with strategic theorists, coupled with recurrent dismissal of varying intelligence estimates, allowed nuclear strategy to be dominated by technological development. In *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*, Michael Sherry captured how quickly the apprehension arising from the creation of such potent instruments of life and death buckled under the weight of technocentric fervor.²⁵ The critical issue this engendered was the expansion of US nuclear force postures absent a coherent theory of victory. The pervasive influence of technological development remained a pivotal factor during three distinct periods: the race for the bomb (1940–1945), the period of scarcity (1945–1954), and the period of plenty (1954–1974).

The Race for the Bomb (1940–1945)

Interpreting the pursuit of the bomb as a technologically driven race helps elucidate the “fragmentary and oblique character of the official record.”²⁶ While it was likely not Los Alamos’ intention, their prioritization of swiftly fielding a demonstrably successful bomb before the war’s end “significantly narrowed the choices open to policymakers in the summer 1945.”²⁷ The emphasis on rapidly deploying a technologically viable bomb accounts for the complete reversal of the military’s May 1943 strategic concept, which targeted “an isolated naval base rather than a large city.”²⁸ Persistent concerns about the morality of intentionally targeting cities could not reverse the strategic course set by the “accumulated momentum of previous technical decisions.”²⁹ Even intelligence reports regarding potential POW camps housing allies had little impact on the revised target selection and employment concepts.³⁰ The negligible influence of these reports underscores how the erratic suppression of facts fostered the cognitive dissonance necessary to deliberately select targets that could devastate civilian population centers or allied POWs—under the guise of military necessity.

²⁴ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 503.

²⁵ Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 201.

²⁶ Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power*, 482.

²⁷ Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power*, 482, 485.

²⁸ Summation of the military’s early attitude towards nuclear targeting was captured in the Military Planning Committee (MPC) meeting on 5 May 1945 and recounted in Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 484.

²⁹ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 482.

³⁰ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 506.

Technical development considerations took precedence because national-level discussions on nuclear targeting strategy virtually ceased by mid-1943, resulting in an “absence of firm direction from above.”³¹ Los Alamos’ relative autonomy meant that Oppenheimer’s concerns about concurrently pursuing five distinct bomb designs were only assessed from a technical standpoint. This had significant implications for the viability of certain designs. The greater technological complexity of underwater weapons (UW) led to the recommendation to suspend the effort, despite UW being the most aligned with the strategic concept of 5 May 1943. The confirmation that technical considerations had become predominant at all levels was evident when the UW programs were officially paused in December 1943.³²

With a reduced number of weapon designs, Los Alamos shifted its focus to constructing a weapon optimized against cities “without consulting high-level officials in Washington.”³³ The primary factor in that decision was neither moral nor strategic but was driven by technical constraints inherent in a blast-focused weapon design. A blast weapon had to be dropped from high altitude to avoid fratricide and would be ineffective “against hardened targets such as bunkers, dugouts, armored vehicles, or warships.”³⁴ Additionally, the scarcity of materials, which would come to characterize the subsequent period, rendered the practicality of a show of force drop unfeasible.³⁵ These factors converged against last-minute changes to the design or recommended deployment methods; on 6 and 9 August 1945, the first two atomic bombs were dropped on Japanese cities.³⁶

The Period of Scarcity (1945–1954)

Scarcity governed the interplay between technological development and US nuclear strategy following World War II. Scarcity encompassed four key elements: strategic guidance, usable nuclear material, available delivery systems, and adversary parity. The enduring aspect of scarcity throughout the early periods was the absence of US strategic guidance, allowing technologically driven capabilities to become “the most critical determinant in strategic and operational planning.”³⁷ The subsequent elements of scarcity limited the feasible targets, as “the nuclear stockpile was still too small and the weapons too large and unwieldy to be used against true

³¹ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 483–84.

³² Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 484–86.

³³ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 484–87.

³⁴ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 487.

³⁵ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 489.

³⁶ Malloy, “The Rules of Civilized Warfare,” 506–08.

³⁷ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 14.

tactical targets.”³⁸ Despite these limitations, initial efforts were made to integrate the ideas of strategists like Bernard Brodie into crafting a coherent approach to countering the Soviet ascent as a nuclear peer adversary.³⁹

However, the continued erratic nature of the US’s engagement with strategists derailed the plan after only one month. General Curtis E. LeMay successfully advocated for the abandonment of the effort, focusing on its impact on readiness.⁴⁰ The exclusion of impartial strategists resulted in cementing SAC as the “dominant force in operational planning for nuclear war.”⁴¹ Their focus remained steadfast on “the development of innovative technology to increase [its] readiness.”⁴² This was reinforced by the practice of bootstrapping, using intelligence estimates to justify high levels of spending on acquiring capabilities in an escalatory cycle.⁴³ Essentially, SAC utilized self-produced intelligence estimates as bargaining chips for resources that furthered their predetermined objectives, namely countering the challenges of nuclear defense by accumulating preemptive capabilities that leveraged technological advancements.⁴⁴

The Period of Plenty (1954–1974)

As SAC gained increased resources under Pres. Dwight Eisenhower, the relationship between nuclear strategy and technological development shifted from one defined by scarcity to one characterized by plenty. However, the existence of nuclear plenty did little to alleviate the situation. Instead, the rapid deployment of more potent thermonuclear weapons, longer-range B-52 bombers, and SAC-owned advanced computer targeting systems only served to compound the complexity of the issue.⁴⁵ Each technological advancement fueled an expanding target list, necessitating more weapons, additional delivery vehicles, and enhanced capabilities.⁴⁶ Similarly, the Soviet pursuit of innovative delivery systems significantly reduced their previously technologically constrained 30-day nuclear force projection timelines, prompting corresponding efforts by US leadership.⁴⁷ This entailed the deployment of ICBMs, IRBMs, and SSBNs, whose nuclear military attributes—such

³⁸ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 16.

³⁹ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 18.

⁴⁰ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 18.

⁴¹ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 19.

⁴² Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 20.

⁴³ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 22–23, 38.

⁴⁴ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 31–35.

⁴⁵ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 36–37.

⁴⁶ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 50.

⁴⁷ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 38.

as CEP, yield, retargeting—were driven by technological deployment timelines rather than a comprehensive strategic vision.⁴⁸

Implications for Kroenig’s Theory

The concentration of American resources into nuclear technological development persisted despite presidential dismissal of intelligence estimates. Additionally, numerous strategic studies advocating for the United States to abandon city targeting in favor of a more optimal mix of targets had little effect on mitigating the excessive expansion of the nuclear stockpile.⁴⁹ Ultimately, President Eisenhower “realized that his attempt to set limits had failed.”⁵⁰ The president’s failure and SAC’s success in their endeavor to deploy as many ready forces as possible stemmed from their exploitation of technological advancements and the abundance of nuclear resources.⁵¹ Once the course was set for the US legacy of bootstrapping, subsequent administrations grappled with the formidable challenge of undoing it.⁵² This dynamic tragically confirms the enduringly erratic nature of US engagement with strategic theorists. Moreover, Rosenberg’s historical analysis effectively rebuts Kroenig’s assertion that nuclear superiority-brinkmanship does not necessarily lead to arms races—illustrated by how virtually nothing could deter SAC from exploiting an alleged bomber and missile gap.⁵³

In reality, the US legacy of bootstrapping underscores how expanding stockpiles only fueled SAC’s voracious appetite for ever-increasing numbers of weapons and delivery systems.⁵⁴ Therefore, if Kroenig’s theory were implemented consistently, it would almost certainly resurrect this legacy. The crucial difference today is that the US no longer operates in a relatively simplistic bipolar world. While Russia remains an active nuclear rival, China, Iran, and North Korea are developing nuclear capabilities to challenge US interests.⁵⁵ Pursuing superiority in this context would deplete limited US resources, encourage nuclear proliferation, and “raise the danger of catastrophic destruction as a result of miscalculation, terrorism, or sabotage.”⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 47, 52–53, 57–58, 63.

⁴⁹ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 36, 40, 48, 57, 59–60, 62.

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 65.

⁵¹ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 65.

⁵² William Burr, “The Nixon Administration, the ‘Horror Strategy,’ and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969–1972,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 34–78, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵³ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 40 and 48.

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 31–35.

⁵⁵ Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, “Stalking the Secured Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1–2 (2015), 40, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵⁶ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 17.

Lessons from Antithetical Strategic Camps

Two opposing camps emerged as alternative frameworks to bootstrapping: proponents of limited nuclear war and proponents of the sufficiency of a secure second-strike capability. Henry Kissinger asserted that “the most fruitful area for current strategic thought is the conduct and efficacy of limited nuclear war.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Herman Kahn espoused the technical and operational feasibility of nuclear war.⁵⁸ Despite the early advocacy, “scholars and strategists grew increasingly skeptical regarding the feasibility of limited nuclear war.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, limited nuclear war has resurfaced as a compelling concept, despite its numerous flaws, owing to the intricacies of a multipolar world that includes doctrines like escalate-to-deescalate.⁶⁰ Conversely, some argue that the United States should solely maintain a limited second-strike capability.⁶¹ However, Austin Long and Brendan Green effectively argued how this stance disregards the mutability of all weapon systems. During the Cold War, even SSBNs and mobile ICBMs were made vulnerable by significant US investments in acoustics, SIGINT, and UAVs.⁶² Examination of theories concerning limited nuclear war reveals risks associated with nuclear proliferation and the potential breach of the tradition of non-use, while consideration of solely maintaining a second-strike capability exposes issues with relying on a small number of sophisticated systems.

Untenability of Limited Nuclear War

The resurgence of old adversaries and the emergence of new nuclear-weapon states (NWS) have expanded the scope of plausible nuclear “next use” scenarios.⁶³ Many of these scenarios revolve around what could be termed as limited nuclear war. However, before delving into the feasibility of constraining a nuclear conflict, it is imperative to delineate what is meant by limited. Specifically, it denotes the constrained employment of nuclear weapons within a broader scheme of attack.

⁵⁷ Andrew L. Ross, “2. The Origins of Limited Nuclear War Theory,” in *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 21–48, 23.

⁵⁸ Herman Kahn, *The Nature and Feasibility of War and Deterrence* (Santa Monica: RAND, 20 January 1960), 4–17, <https://www.rand.org/>.

⁵⁹ Forrest E. Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear: Managing Escalation in a Conflict with Russia,” *Proliferation Papers*, no. 40 (Winter 2012), 12, <https://www.ifri.org/>.

⁶⁰ Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear,” 44.

⁶¹ Long and Green, “Stalking the Secured Second Strike,” 39–40.

⁶² Long and Green, “Stalking the Secured Second Strike,” 47–55.

⁶³ Andrew L. Ross, “The Origins of Limited Nuclear War Theory,” 22.

This differs from the broader concept of “a limited war, fought for limited gains.”⁶⁴ Given this definition, it may be acknowledged that limited nuclear war is technically feasible; however, the significant risk of escalation following any departure from the tradition of non-use renders the concept impractical as an offensive US strategy. Kahn’s assertions regarding technical feasibility fall short because they fail to address the complexity stemming from proliferation, the anticipated repercussions of deviating from the tradition of non-use, or the uncertainty surrounding escalation during a conflict. Nevertheless, the US cannot dictate adversarial pursuits and must therefore draw lessons on how to prudently shape its own force posture and how to operate through a wide range of nuclear scenarios.

Insufficiency of Technical Feasibility. Kahn endeavored to debunk misconceptions regarding the feasibility of limited nuclear war. His aim was to refute what he termed as a strategy of “mutual-homicide.” Kahn argued that the adoption of mutually assured destruction only served to create a more perilous world, failing to prevent the possibility of miscalculation.⁶⁵ To this end, he effectively demonstrated that concerns regarding genetic effects, medical issues, economic repercussions, and other factors resulting from nuclear war were largely exaggerated.⁶⁶ Kahn’s exploration of the technical feasibility of operating within and through nuclear war led to the formulation of his escalation dominance theory.⁶⁷ However, his theory “suffers from several serious defects when one attempts to apply it in real-world strategy making.”⁶⁸ These defects can be categorized into three areas: a lack of commonly understood discernible rungs by all parties, the distortion of escalation as a one-dimensional progression when viewing it as a ladder, and the rarity of attainable offsetting counter moves in the chaotic context of warfare.⁶⁹ Each of these highlights critical issues with directly translating technical feasibility into a justification for pursuing a strategy of offensive limited nuclear war.

Complexity of Proliferation. The nuclear multipolarity of the strategic environment further exacerbates the challenges associated with escalation dominance and the concept of limited nuclear war. The inclusion of more NWSs only serves to obscure the underlying dynamics of game theory. It must be acknowledged that theorists like Kroenig and Thomas Schelling argue that complexity is beneficial and that “uncertainty is a virtue.”⁷⁰ Kenneth Waltz echoed this sentiment, stating

⁶⁴ Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear,” 44.

⁶⁵ Kahn, *The Nature and Feasibility of War and Deterrence*, 1–4.

⁶⁶ Kahn, *The Nature and Feasibility of War and Deterrence*, 5–12.

⁶⁷ Kahn, *The Nature and Feasibility of War and Deterrence*, 35–39.

⁶⁸ Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear,” 14.

⁶⁹ Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear,” 15.

⁷⁰ Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear,” 16.

that “the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence rests on uncertainty.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, the high-stakes version of game theory required to effectively employ brinkmanship or escalation dominance reveals a common flaw.⁷² Specifically, desperation can drive governments to take additional risks, leading to a nuclear “prudence that still leaves room for war.”⁷³ Hence, it must be conceded that proliferation heightens the likelihood of “deterrence failures and deliberate or accidental war.”⁷⁴

Furthermore, proliferation amplifies the inherent risks associated with nuclear safety limitations. Even dissenters about the complexity of new NWSs acknowledge that proliferation has “increased risk of nuclear weapons accidents and accidental war.”⁷⁵ Risk increases because “imperfect humans inside imperfect organizations control their nuclear weapons.”⁷⁶ The Cuban missile crisis highlighted the deficiencies of both hawkish and dovish approaches in addressing “the possibility that an accidental nuclear war could have occurred during the crisis.”⁷⁷ The crisis exposed flaws in the belief that accidental war was virtually impossible.⁷⁸ The fundamental assumption that nuclear war could only occur if political leaders deemed it in their best interest became untenable.⁷⁹ Scott Sagan’s recognition of the heightened risks led him to conclude that “more nuclear-armed states may be our fate; it should not be our goal.”⁸⁰ Likewise, the principle of increased risk of unintentional nuclear war resulting from accidents can be linked to expanded stockpile sizes.

Breaking the Tradition of Non-Use. The United States should refrain from pursuing an offensive strategy of limited nuclear war because deviating from the tradition of non-use would eliminate a crucial safeguard against nuclear escalation. The connection between this safeguard and the avoidance of limited nuclear war is evident in elite war games, while the opposite trend is observed among non-elites. Advocates of a nuclear taboo cite war games like DETEX I as evidence supporting their argument. In this particular war game, MIT attempted to promote the feasibility of a limited nuclear strike during escalation, but the prevailing “tendency [was] for escalation to occur only along a spectrum of conventional arms . . . before

⁷¹ Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 143.

⁷² Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear,” 17.

⁷³ Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, 176.

⁷⁴ Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, 47.

⁷⁵ Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 265.

⁷⁶ Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, 106.

⁷⁷ Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, 55.

⁷⁸ Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, 234.

⁷⁹ Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, 262.

⁸⁰ Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, 84.

the use of even a single tactical nuclear weapon.”⁸¹ This consistent pattern of steadfast adherence to non-use persisted in nearly all elite player war games.⁸² However, in one of the rare instances where an elite war game ventured into the realm of nuclear conflict, the initial limited usage quickly spiraled out of control after just three rounds. This underscores the notion that any nuclear deployment during wartime would unleash uncontrollable devastation. Secretary of Defense Colin Powell echoed this sentiment when questioned about the practicality of developing tactical (limited) nuclear war plans.⁸³

Conversely, the restraint exhibited by elites sharply contrasts with non-elite war games. In such instances, “Pentagon officials were surprised by how readily their guests were to go nuclear.”⁸⁴ However, this outcome is supported by data indicating that the majority of Americans endorse the use of nuclear weapons against an adversary’s civilian population if it saves American lives.⁸⁵ The disparity between elites and non-elites is succinctly captured by Reid Pauly’s quip, “if you want thermonuclear war to break out in a game, you just get some high-school students.”⁸⁶ The implication is that if nuclear non-use is recognized as a taboo, it “function[s] more by a mechanism of conformity than morality.”⁸⁷ This elucidates why adherence to the norm dissipates when non-use is violated in war games. Regardless of whether one adheres to the nuclear taboo or not, it must be acknowledged that reinstating the stigma would be considerably more challenging than upholding the tradition of non-use, and thus “it is vitally important to err on the side of preventing any violation.”⁸⁸

The Fog of Escalation. The data presented above illustrates how swiftly deviating from safeguards against nuclear Armageddon can descend into an ambiguous haze of uncontrolled escalation. Consequently, refraining from offensive strategies of limited nuclear war does not overlook national self-interest. Rather, its avoidance acknowledges that “breaking the precedent might ultimately do more long-term

⁸¹ Reid B.C. Pauly, “Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button?: Wargames and the Sources of Nuclear Restraint,” *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018), 174, <https://doi.org/>.

⁸² Pauly, “Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button?,” 176–80.

⁸³ Pauly, “Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button?,” 182–85.

⁸⁴ Pauly, “Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button?,” 187.

⁸⁵ Scott D. Sagan and Benjamin A. Valentino, “Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans Really Think About Using Nuclear Weapons and Killing Noncombatants,” *International Security* 42, no. 1 (Summer 2017), 75, <https://doi.org/>.

⁸⁶ Pauly, “Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button?,” 187.

⁸⁷ Pauly, “Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button?,” 189.

⁸⁸ Nina Tannenwald, “Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo,” *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005), 38, <https://doi.org/>.

damage . . . than the short-term military advantage could justify.”⁸⁹ Even defensive nuclear use could be misconstrued and result in unintended escalation.⁹⁰ Hence, a primary safeguard against an uncontrolled pattern of escalation must be to steer clear of entering the cycle in the first place.

That acknowledgment does not dismiss scenarios where an existential threat exists, which might necessitate nuclear deployment. Rather, it acknowledges that limited nuclear war is not a viable option despite the American tendency to grant their “leaders wide latitude on the decision to use nuclear weapons.”⁹¹ Instead, the possibility of escalating to all-out war should prompt all states to proceed with utmost caution if nuclear-weapon states NWSs are involved. This holds true regardless of any specific measure of relative superiority. The historical instances of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Schlieffen Plan, and the Franco-Prussian War serve as examples demonstrating the difficulty of containing war during the fog of escalation.⁹² The technical feasibility of limited nuclear war does not alleviate the complexities associated with proliferation, the risks of deviating from the tradition of non-use, or the uncertainty of escalation when assessing its viability as a strategy. Therefore, the United States should refrain from pursuing an offensive strategy of limited nuclear war while developing resilient options for its deterrent capabilities.

Mutability of a Secure Second Strike

The key lesson learned from assessing exclusive reliance on a secure second-strike capability is that no weapon system is impervious to change. Adversaries will persist in seeking strategic offsets and counters, thus rendering enduring silver bullets nonexistent. While discussions about secure second-strike capabilities have traditionally centered on SSBNs and mobile-ICBMs, the modern reliance on limited numbers of stealth bombers highlights the broader applicability of this lesson. Following the Cold War, exponential advancements in SIGINT, detection, and surveillance technologies have continued to expose nuclear forces to risk.⁹³ Consequently, Long and Green concluded “that simple numerical differences or ratios are a poor way to measure nuclear superiority; the ability to find, track, and

⁸⁹ Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, “Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013), 192, <https://doi.org/>.

⁹⁰ Barry R. Posen, “Inadvertent Nuclear War?: Escalation and NATO’s Northern Flank,” *International Security* 7, no. 2 (1982), 32, <https://doi.org/>.

⁹¹ Press, Sagan, and Valentino, “Atomic Aversion,” 200.

⁹² Posen, “Inadvertent Nuclear War,” 32.

⁹³ Posen, “Inadvertent Nuclear War,” 57.

surprise nuclear targets is far more important.”⁹⁴ The risk becomes particularly acute if the United States adopts a strategy reliant on low numbers of sophisticated weapon systems.

Therefore, the United States cannot afford to remain passive and allow adversarial technology to progress unchecked, potentially rendering its nuclear forces obsolete. This raises the question: what capabilities must the U.S. pursue to maintain a credible nuclear deterrence? From a USAF standpoint, Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall testified to Congress that the sophisticated nature of the nuclear-capable B-21 will drive the USAF to reduce the ratio of fighters to bombers.⁹⁵ While the B-21 offers clear advantages, there are also evident risks associated with relying on relatively small numbers of advanced strategic attack platforms for deterrence. Instead, the United States needs to pursue a force structure that incorporates some advanced systems alongside high quantities of more affordable platforms and investments in auxiliary support platforms. The validity of this concept will be demonstrated by highlighting both the appeal of constructing a modern battleplane—such as the B-21—and outlining the value gained from quantity in a threat-rich environment where adversaries may potentially neutralize any deployed system.

Allure of Building a Modern Battleplane

The threat posed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) must shape US policy assessments regarding the types of nuclear and conventional forces to be deployed. This is because the PRC is actively deploying capabilities that “will make survival increasingly untenable for massed ground combat formations, air bases, and surface warships.”⁹⁶ When combined with their capabilities to detect and track SSBNs, changes in the operational landscape jeopardize US credibility to deter PRC aggression effectively. Besides uncertainties surrounding whether nuclear deterrence can extend to allies and partners, the overall weakening of US deterrence is evidenced by “the mere existence of widespread doubt about Taiwan’s ability to survive an onslaught.”⁹⁷ Nevertheless, solutions must consider the inherent limitations posed by the PRC’s formidable antiaccess forces.

⁹⁴ Posen, “Inadvertent Nuclear War,” 66.

⁹⁵ John A. Tirpak, “Kendall: Ratio of Fighters to Bombers May Shift Toward Bombers in the Future,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, 2 May 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

⁹⁶ Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2022), 171.

⁹⁷ Haddick, *Fire on the Water*, 174.

Appropriately, the primary appeal of constructing modern Douhetan battleplanes, exemplified by the B-21, stems from the belief that airpower is ideally suited to evade enemy attacks while en route to strategic targets.⁹⁸ While Giulio Douhet's theory is not without flaws, the emergence of stealth technology has breathed new life into his vision. Stealth aircraft revitalize the notion that airpower can "go far behind the fortified line of defense without first breaking through them."⁹⁹ The Gulf War's successful utilization of stealth aircraft appears to validate and reinforce this hypothesis. The F-117's limited numbers were compensated for by their capability to penetrate deep into Baghdad. Despite accounting for only two percent of the total strike sorties, they "struck nearly 40 percent of the targets identified as 'strategic' by planners and commanders."¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the F-117's capacity to elude Iraqi antiaccess/area denial (A2AD) capabilities obviated the necessity to expose "large support packages of other non-stealthy aircraft."¹⁰¹ This alone elucidates the appeal of constructing a stealth nuclear bomber.

Moreover, another appealing aspect of the B-21 is its extended range, which addresses basing challenges by operating beyond PRC threat rings.¹⁰² Modern aircraft have complicated basing logistics and created more conspicuous targets; "the advent of faster, heavier, and more sophisticated aircraft meant a concomitant needed for longer runways, stronger materials, and all-weather facilities."¹⁰³ This limitation prompted Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III to commend the B-21 for its ability to use extended "range to prosecute targets without the need for bases close to enemy territory."¹⁰⁴ Hence, it is evident how the B-21 offers a significant advantage in the United States' efforts to maintain credible deterrence against PRC aggression. However, the enduring challenge remains the lesson emphasized by Long and Green regarding the mutability of all weapon systems.

The Quality of Quantity. Since the advent of airpower, there have been proponents of the notion that the bomber will always penetrate enemy defenses—but at what costs?¹⁰⁵ This begs questions regarding the interplay of quality, quantity,

⁹⁸ Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2019), 106, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁹⁹ Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Mark J. Conversino, "The Changed Nature of Strategic Air Attack," *Parameters* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 34, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

¹⁰¹ Conversino, "The Changed Nature of Strategic Air Attack," 37.

¹⁰² Tirpak, "Kendall," 2.

¹⁰³ Thomas E. Griffith, *MacArthur's Airman: General George C. Kenney and the War in the Southwest Pacific*, ed. Theodore A. Wilson (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 89.

¹⁰⁴ Griffith, *MacArthur's Airman*, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Speaker, "The Past, Present, and Future of Airpower" (lecture, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL, 5 December 2023).

and expenditure. In World War I, daylight bombing resulted in such substantial casualties and aircraft losses that the practice essentially ceased by the end of 1916.¹⁰⁶ In World War II, both the US and British forces incurred significant losses because they assumed their modern bombers would invariably penetrate enemy defenses.¹⁰⁷ However, the existential threat necessitated production levels to match requirements, and the human toll was reluctantly paid.¹⁰⁸ Subsequently, during the Vietnam War, the prospect of losing bombers to enemy fighters and A2AD systems led to the withholding of B-52s from “Rolling Thunder strikes deep inside [enemy territory].”¹⁰⁹ Consequently, the price was paid in terms of compromised mission effectiveness rather than human lives or aircraft losses. Presently, any of these three expenditures would be hard pills to swallow, particularly given that each of the 100 planned B-21s costs approximately USD 750 million.¹¹⁰

The perceived immutability of modern stealth bombers to enemy attacks offers little reassurance. Recent events serve as stark reminders of their vulnerability to enemy cunning and advancements in countermeasures.¹¹¹ During Operation Allied Force, Serbian forces demonstrated that a combination of tactics, intelligence, and luck could enable an inferior force to down sophisticated stealth aircraft.¹¹² Their tactics mirrored those employed by the British during the Battle of Britain, leveraging a network of spotters and human intelligence assets to overcome technological disadvantages.¹¹³ Utilizing these tactics, Serbian ground battery commanders gained precise knowledge of the force composition, mission schedules, and entry/exit routes, enabling them to shoot down an F-117.¹¹⁴ While luck played a role in the downing of the F-117, contemporary developments in tactics and countermeasures by more sophisticated adversaries, such as the PRC, present a

¹⁰⁶ John H. Morrow, “The First World War, 1914-1919,” in *A History of Air Warfare*, ed. John Andreas Olsen (Washington: Potomac Books, 2010), 11.

¹⁰⁷ Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 165.

¹⁰⁸ John Andreas Olsen, “Part I: 1914-1945,” in *A History of Air Warfare*, ed. John Andreas Olsen (Washington: Potomac Books, 2010), 2.

¹⁰⁹ Phil Haun and Colin Jackson, “Breaker of Armies: Air Power in the Easter Offensive and the Myth of LINEBACKER I and II in the Vietnam War,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2016), 143, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

¹¹⁰ Tirpak, “Kendall,” 3.

¹¹¹ Conversino, “The Changed Nature of Strategic Air Attack,” 37.

¹¹² Dario Leone, “An In-Depth Analysis of How Serbs Were Able to Shoot Down An F-117 Stealth Fighter during Operation Allied Force,” *Aviation History*, 26 March 2020, <https://theaviationgeekclub.com/>.

¹¹³ Samir Puri, “The Role of Intelligence in Deciding the Battle of Britain,” *Intelligence and National Security* 21, no. 3 (2006), 427, <https://doi.org/>.

¹¹⁴ Leone, “An In-Depth Analysis of How Serbs.”

more substantial threat today.¹¹⁵ Given the high cost and prolonged production timelines associated with sophisticated systems, the United States must prioritize the benefits derived from large numbers of less expensive conventional assets. These assets can complement strategic deterrence efforts and provide additional layers of defense below the nuclear threshold.

Implications for US Nuclear Strategy

Recognizing that the PRC or Russia might draw similar conclusions today as Japan did in 1941 should sensitize US policymakers to the potential catastrophic outcomes of deliberately pursuing a strategy of superiority-brinkmanship. The erosion of deterrence against these formidable adversaries would stem from a perceived lack of credible military capability to thwart their aggression.¹¹⁶ Reversing this trend demands astutely deploying forces that instill doubt in adversarial leaders regarding the feasibility of a *fait accompli*-style attack. In contrast to superiority-brinkmanship, Robert McNamara's wisdom remains relevant: "it's not clear that we have to fight them. So for God's sake, let's try to avoid it."¹¹⁷ This sentiment applies to each adversary currently positioned at the proverbial gates. Therefore, the United States should conclude that the potential costs and risks outweigh any perceived benefits. Ultimately, Kroenig's theory falters both in theory and in practice due to its inherent flaws and its failure to mitigate the risks of hastening nuclear Armageddon.

That acknowledgment falls well short of advocating for nuclear disarmament. Instead, it underscores the reliability of deterrence as a coercive function of nuclear weapons compared to their effectiveness in compellence.¹¹⁸ In this light, Jervis' assertion over 40 years ago that deterrence represents an absolute capability, rather than a relative one, remains pertinent.¹¹⁹ When combined with insights derived from an examination of limited nuclear war and the perils of overreliance on a second-strike capability, a more nuanced foundation for shaping US nuclear strategy emerges.

The first pillar of this strategic framework involves deploying advanced nuclear capabilities that are adaptable and less susceptible to adversary countermeasures (such as Sentinel, B-21, LRSO, and Columbia SSBNs), thus mitigating the inher-

¹¹⁵ Mark Episkopos, "Can You Kill a Stealth Fighter?: These 5 Countermeasures Will Help," *National Interest*, 16 December 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

¹¹⁶ Haddick, *Fire on the Water*, 164.

¹¹⁷ David Talbot, *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 13.

¹¹⁸ See Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," 631.

¹¹⁹ Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," 618.

ent mutability of all weapon systems by incorporating iterative open architectures into new weapons' designs.¹²⁰ The second pillar recognizes that amassing increasingly large numbers of nuclear systems solely for numerical superiority is counter-productive. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining a robust and capable quantity of conventional forces, which possess its own inherent quality.

Finally, the third pillar prioritizes the development of supporting functions (such as NC3, survivable infrastructure, and conventional forces) crucial for instilling doubt in adversarial leaders regarding the success of a *fait accompli* attack on the US homeland. Failure to establish a sufficient, modern, and credible nuclear deterrent guided by these pillars would leave the United States and its allies vulnerable to aggression. 🌟

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¹²⁰ "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Modernization: Costs & Constraints," Center For Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, n.d., <https://armscontrolcenter.org/>.

Tip of the Iceberg

Okinawa 1945 and Lessons for Island Battles

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Abstract

This article examines the Battle of Okinawa in 1945 and draws lessons relevant to a potential future invasion to capture Taiwan. An overview of Operation Iceberg outlines the massive assault by U.S. forces to seize Okinawa from entrenched Japanese defenders over 91 days of combat. Three key lessons emerge: (1) ground forces are paramount, requiring full naval and air support until objectives are secured; (2) airpower dominance decides the offshore battle for surface supremacy; (3) nearby land bases are essential for staging, sustaining, and reinforcing the invasion. While not a replay of past battles, a hypothetical Taiwan campaign would likely feature similar operational challenges as Okinawa involving complex joint operations, need for air supremacy, undersea warfare, and disputes over vital offshore islands and bases. As a seminal Pacific battle, Okinawa's harsh lessons merit thorough analysis by modern planners and strategists.

The US Naval Institute's American Sea Power Project recently tasked a group of authors with projecting a potential invasion of Taiwan in 2026. Notably, several contributors drew parallels from World War II for insights and lessons. Retired Captain William Toti pointed out that a conflict over Taiwan "is not a repeat of Midway. It is Okinawa in reverse, with the United States on the defending side and China attacking with ten times the landing force that went ashore on Okinawa."¹

Operation Iceberg, the successful invasion of Okinawa, unfolded from 1 April to 2 July 1945. It stands as the bloodiest encounter in the Pacific War and holds the distinction of being the largest sea-air-land battle in history. The operation involved more than 1,500 vessels of various types and 183,000 personnel from the US Tenth Army, later reinforced to over 250,000. Over the course of three months, US ground forces suffered 7,374 fatalities, 31,807 wounded, and 239 missing in action. Naval losses added another 4,907 killed and 4,824 wounded, totaling 49,151 casualties. The invasion fleet encountered 36 ships sunk and 368 damaged during the same period. Japanese defenders numbered 120,000, with casualties exceeding 110,000 military personnel killed and over 7,000 taken prisoner, along with the

¹ William Toti, "You Can't Win Without (More) Submarines," *Proceedings* 149, no. 2 (December 2023), <https://www.usni.org/>; and multiple articles in *Proceedings* 150, no. 1 (January 2024), <https://www.usni.org/>.

destruction of more than 7,000 aircraft and 16 vessels. Okinawa's civilian population suffered more than 82,000 casualties, including suicides.²

For both adversaries, the battle for Okinawa served as a full-dress rehearsal for a potential invasion of the Japanese home islands. Many observers regarded the engagement as the pinnacle of amphibious warfare. As Marine lieutenant general Roy E. Geiger stated, "most clearly that our basic principles of tactics and technique are sound, are 'in the book,' and need only be followed in combat." It stands as the most recent large-scale amphibious battle in the Pacific, offering valuable insights into past and potential island conflicts in the region.

This article will analyze the progression of the Okinawa campaign, followed by an examination of its primary lessons for planners and strategists.

The Battle of Okinawa: Overview

Operation Iceberg's objectives centered on the Ryukyu Islands, a prefecture of Japan and the closest territory to Japan's home islands targeted in military operations thus far. Okinawa and its adjacent islands lay approximately 350 miles from Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's home islands, placing them well within the operational range of Japanese land-based aircraft. Additionally, these islands were approximately equidistant from Japanese bases in Shanghai and approximately 500 miles from Japanese airfields in Formosa. In stark contrast, the nearest American bases were situated 900 miles away in Leyte or 1,200 miles distant in the Palau and the Marianas. Honolulu and Pearl Harbor lay 4,100 miles to the east of Okinawa, with San Francisco a further 2,100 miles beyond.³

Okinawa, the largest and most densely populated island in the Ryukyu chain, spanned approximately 60 miles along a primarily north-to-south axis, with widths varying from two to 18 miles. While certain areas boasted flat terrain, particularly in the island's central region, much of Okinawa featured rolling landscapes adorned with frequent woodland. The majority of the island's 400,000 inhabitants resided in its southern third, which encompassed Okinawa's two largest urban centers, Naha and Shuri. Throughout the middle and southern regions of the island, potential airfield sites were scattered.

² This article is based in part on Christopher L. Kolakowski, ed. *Tenth Army Commander: The World War II Diary of Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., 1944-45* (Oxford: Casemate 2023).

³ This profile of Okinawa and plans for Operation Iceberg are from the official histories of the Battle of Okinawa: Roy E. Appleman, et al, *Okinawa: The Last Battle* (Washington: US Army 1948); and Charles S. Nichols, Jr., and Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *Okinawa: Victory in the Pacific* (Washington: US Marine Corps 1955). See also the Operation Iceberg Staff Study, available from DTIC, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

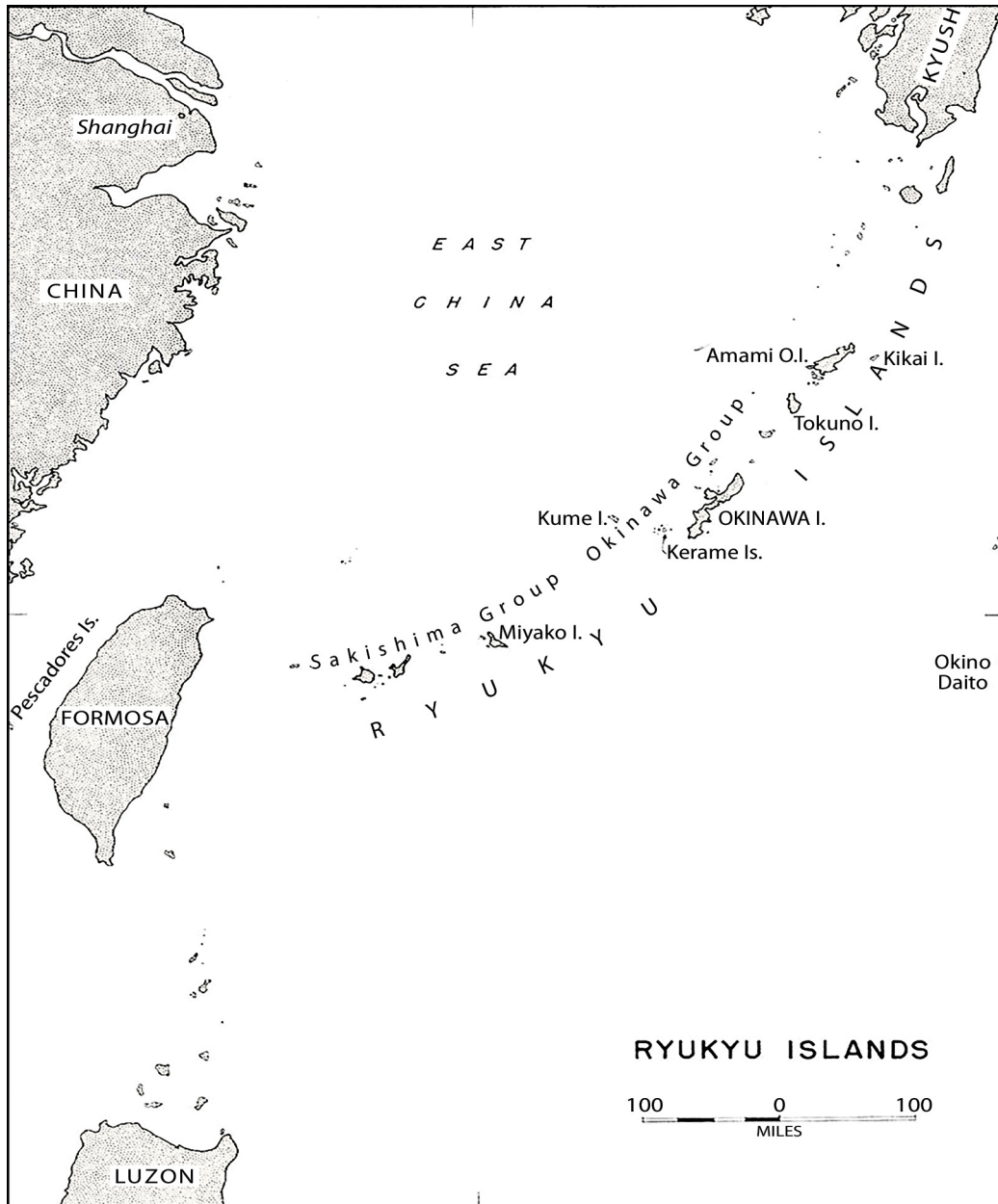


Figure 1. The Ryukyu Islands. (Source: US Army)

Operation Iceberg outlined a comprehensive three-phase strategy for the conquest of Okinawa and its surrounding environs. Initially, Phase I focused on securing southern Okinawa, succeeded by Phase II, which targeted the island's northern

third and the adjacent Ie Shima. Phase III followed, subdivided into stages IIIa through IIIId, with the aim of capturing additional islands situated farther north. Subsequent to each phase's completion, the acquired territory would undergo development to serve as a base for forthcoming operations. The overarching objective was to accommodate an air force comprising 650 aircraft, along with providing anchorages for shipping necessary to support an invasion of the Japanese home islands. Anticipated completion of all objectives was set within a period of 120 days.

LTG Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., US Army, assumed the pivotal role of senior ground commander for Operation Iceberg in his capacity as Commanding General of Tenth Army. Under Buckner's command were a composite force comprising both US Army and US Marine Corps units. The Army contingent included LTG John R. Hodge's XXIV Corps, comprised of MG Archibald V. Arnold's 7th Infantry Division and MG James L. Bradley's 96th Infantry Division, alongside MG Andrew D. Bruce's 77th Infantry Division. Additionally, MG George Griner's 27th Infantry Division stood in floating reserve, with MG Paul Mueller's 81st Infantry Division available upon request to ADM Chester W. Nimitz. Spearheading the Marine contingent was LtGen Roy Geiger's III Amphibious Corps, composed of MajGen Pedro del Valle's 1st Marine Division, MajGen Thomas L. Watson's 2nd Marine Division, and MajGen Lemuel Shepherd's 6th Marine Division.

Island governance and development fell under the purview of an Island Command (ISCOM), led by MG Fred C. Wallace, US Army. Operation Iceberg also entailed the establishment of a dedicated land-based air force centered around the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, designated as the Tactical Air Force (TAF) and under the command of Marine MajGen Francis Mulcahy. Both ISCOM and TAF operated under the jurisdiction of Tenth Army, thereby endowing General Buckner with a broader spectrum of responsibilities than any preceding Pacific field army commander.⁴

Supporting Tenth Army were the 1,500 vessels comprising ADM Raymond Spruance's Fifth Fleet, tasked with providing logistical and protective backing for Buckner's operations. VADM Richmond K. Turner, US Navy, directed all amphibious maneuvers and coordinated the multiple task forces responsible for transporting ground forces to Okinawa. Initially, Buckner reported to Spruance and Turner during the initial phases of the battle, later transitioning to direct accountability to Nimitz. The overarching joint planning emanated from Nimitz's

⁴ Ironically, these forces were originally allocated for Operation Causeway, an invasion of Formosa (Taiwan) and the Chinese coast at Amoy. Logistical concerns, plus the decision to liberate the Philippines, dictated Causeway's shelving.

headquarters, with meticulous coordination between Buckner's and Turner's staffs on the tactical details. The collaborative relationships established prior to the landing proved instrumental during the ensuing battle.

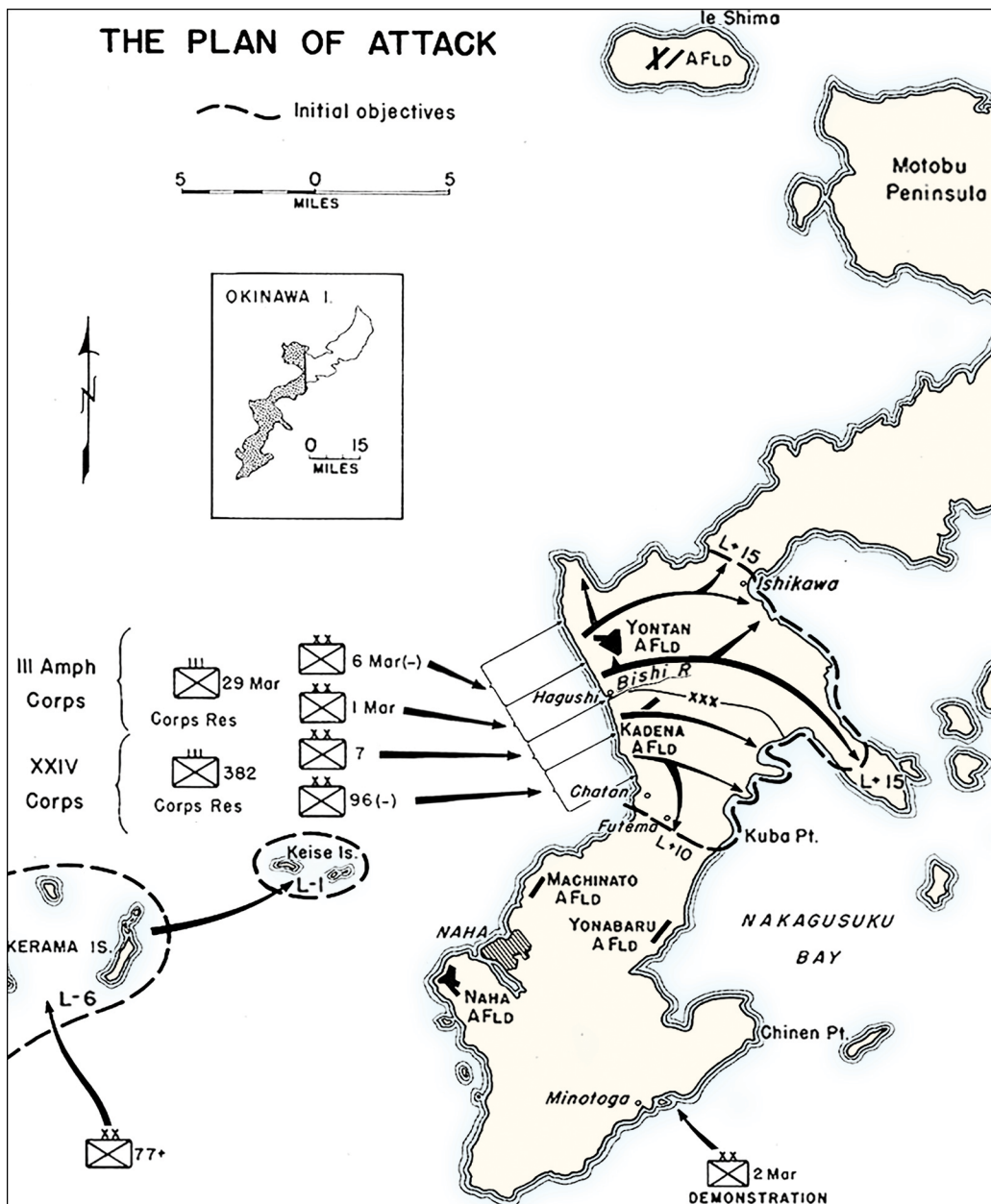


Figure 2. The plan of attack. (Source: US Army)

The final tactical plan for Operation Iceberg outlined Tenth Army's deployment of 183,000 personnel from Hodge's and Geiger's corps for the landing at Hagushi on Okinawa's western shoreline on 1 April 1945. A week preceding the primary assault, Bruce's division would secure the nearby Kerama Retto as a fleet anchorage. Concurrently, Watson's division would stage a demonstration off Minatoga on Okinawa's southeastern coast to divert enemy attention. Subsequent to the Hagushi landings, Tenth Army would undertake a concerted effort to traverse Okinawa and bifurcate the island, a task anticipated to span up to 15 days. Following this phase, XXIV Corps would execute Phase I, encompassing the capture of Okinawa's southern third. Under Buckner's directives, III Amphibious Corps and other available units would launch an offensive against northern Okinawa and its adjacent islands as part of Phase II. The subsequent operations in Phases IIIc and III d (with Phases IIIa and IIIb omitted during planning) would witness three divisions from V Amphibious Corps and one from Tenth Army seizing Miyako and Kikai Islands further to the north. Admiral Nimitz would dictate the sequencing and timing of Phase III assaults.

Opposing Buckner on Okinawa was Lieutenant General Ushijima Mitsuru's Thirty-Second Army, established in 1944 as part of Japan's broader strategy to prepare for a final confrontation on the home islands, with Okinawa serving as a strategic stronghold. "The objective was . . . to smash U.S. endeavors to move aerial and naval bases forward, and to carry out overall operations," recalled Colonel Hayashi Saburo of Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ). "In other words, the execution of a decisive struggle in the homeland was to be facilitated . . . IGHQ felt that there were two keys to success in the Okinawa campaign: Proper and effective aerial operations; and prevention of the establishment of an American beachhead."⁵

Ushijima commanded a formidable force comprising two divisions, a brigade, a tank regiment, Okinawan militia, and attached units, totaling 120,000 men. Opting for a strategy aimed at maximizing delay and inflicting damage upon US forces, Ushijima elected not to mount a defense directly on the beaches, instead enticing Buckner's troops to venture inland for a decisive confrontation. Most of Ushijima's forces were strategically positioned within a series of fortified defense rings centered around Shuri, with additional detachments stationed in central and northern Okinawa. The intent was to draw Buckner's army deeper into Ushijima's prepared defenses, thereby setting the stage for decisive counterattacks and eventual victory.

⁵ Saburo Hayashi, *Kogun* (Quantico: Marine Corps Association 1959), 140–42.

American intelligence succeeded in gathering substantial information regarding Ushijima's preparations and gained a fundamental understanding of Okinawa's topography. However, deficiencies existed in two critical areas. Firstly, detailed maps encompassing the entirety of Okinawa were lacking. Secondly, assessments of Ushijima's troop strength underestimated his numbers, attributing between 60,000 and 70,000 men to him—a miscalculation that persisted until the latter stages of the battle.

On 26 March, Bruce's 77th Infantry Division launched an assault on Kerama Retto, successfully securing the island group in just over four days with minimal casualties. On 1 April 1945, Tenth Army initiated its landing operation on Okinawa, with the invasion date designated as L-Day, or "Love Day," utilizing the phonetic alphabet of the era—an ironically chosen appellation that sparked considerable commentary.

Upon landing, American forces encountered minimal resistance as they advanced inland. A private from the 7th Infantry Division encapsulated the sentiments of many when he remarked, "I've already lived longer than I thought I would." By nightfall, troops from Tenth Army had made significant strides across the island, achieving in 24 hours what had been anticipated to require several days. Reflecting on the swift progress, Buckner felt fortunate, "The Japs have missed their best opportunity on the ground and in the air," mused Buckner to his diary. "When their counter-attack comes we will be holding strong ground."⁶

On 3 April, Buckner signaled to Geiger, "All restrictions removed on your advance northward." Buckner's decision to initiate Phase II ahead of schedule demonstrated notable initiative and assertiveness. Subsequently, the Marines swiftly embarked upon the northern Okinawa offensive, effectively encircling and neutralizing pockets of enemy resistance.⁷

As Tenth Army continued its advance, the Japanese launched repeated concentrated air assaults against Spruance's fleet. Employing a combination of conventional and kamikaze tactics, these attacks inflicted substantial damage and resulted in the sinking of numerous vessels, including an ammunition ship. On 7 April, the Japanese Navy dispatched a task force led by the battleship *Yamato*, which was intercepted and sunk halfway to Okinawa.

In a letter to his wife Adele dated 14 April, Buckner reported, "We are constantly under air attack but our carrier planes and my own operating from captured fields have done a splendid piece of work and shot down several hundred of the attack-

⁶ Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 74; and Simon Bolivar Buckner diary, 1 April 1945.

⁷ Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 138–48.

ing planes.” He further noted, “The quality of Jap pilots is deteriorating and those recently encountered show evidence of hasty and inadequate training.”⁸

In the southern sector of Okinawa, XXIV Corps confronted Ushijima’s fortified outposts and encountered the initial defensive line preceding Shuri. The 96th Infantry Division engaged Kakazu Ridge, while the 7th Infantry Division confronted a series of ridges adorned with bunker-like stone tombs. Despite repeated assaults by both divisions, little headway was achieved. Compounding the challenge was the imperative need to conserve ammunition due to the loss of supply ships offshore. By 12 April, after three days of intense combat, the corps had advanced a mere 500 yards, prompting a temporary halt to regroup. Amid fierce fighting, a Japanese counterattack was successfully repelled. Reflecting on the grim reality of the situation, General Hodge remarked, “It is going to be really tough. . . . I see no way to get them out except blast them out yard by yard.”⁹

Buckner maintained a sense of optimism amidst the challenges. In a letter to Adele, he reflected, “In the south, we are up against the most formidable defenses yet encountered in the Pacific, well backed up by artillery and Navy mortars. . . . Since we have all the airfields that we need to work on for the present, I am not hurrying the attack on the south but am greatly reducing casualties by a gradual and systemic destruction of their works. This we are doing successfully and can, I feel confident, break their line in ample time for our purposes.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, offshore, Bruce’s 77th Infantry Division launched an assault on Ie Shima on April 16. Following four days of intense combat, the island fell, securing a vital airfield. Tragically, on 18 April, the third day of the invasion, war correspondent Ernie Pyle lost his life in the fighting. The division later erected a monument at the site where they “lost a buddy,” a poignant tribute from the World War II GI.¹¹

In the interim, General Hodge marshaled the 27th Infantry Division as reinforcements and recommenced the offensive on 19 April. A combined barrage of land-based artillery and naval gunfire inaugurated the assault, marking the commencement of the largest bombardment witnessed in the Pacific War. Despite the concentrated firepower, the entrenched Japanese forces remained largely impervious, launching a fierce counteroffensive against the advancing Americans. In response, American infantry adopted what Buckner described as “blowtorch and

⁸ John Toland, *The Rising Sun Vol. II* (New York: Random House 1970), 845–68; and Simon Bolivar Buckner correspondence, 14 April 1945, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁹ Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 103–37.

¹⁰ Buckner correspondence, 14 April 1945, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

¹¹ Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 149–83.

corkscrew” tactics, utilizing explosives and incendiary devices to isolate and eliminate Japanese strongholds.

For five days, Ushijima’s defenders fiercely contested Hodge’s advances, engaging in relentless back-and-forth combat. However, mounting casualties eventually compelled Ushijima to issue a directive for a strategic withdrawal southward. The attacking divisions, too, suffered substantial losses; a private from the 96th Infantry Division recounted that only 11 out of the 44 men in his platoon emerged unscathed following this phase of the conflict.¹²

The last ten days of April marked a pivotal juncture in the Okinawa campaign. Formal resistance in northern Okinawa ceased on 20 April, just a day before Bruce officially declared Ie Shima secure. These triumphs freed Geiger’s corps and Bruce’s division for potential redeployment, prompting Buckner to solicit input from his staff and peers regarding the optimal utilization of these troops.

During days of deliberation, various officers advocated for deploying one division to execute a landing at Minatoga and encircle the Japanese stronghold at Shuri. Conversely, others correctly highlighted the exhaustion and depletion of XXIV Corps resulting from recent engagements, stressing the need for reinforcement. Additionally, Buckner faced mounting pressure from Admiral Nimitz to intensify the offensive. On 23 April, Nimitz lamented, “I’m losing a ship and a half a day. So if this line isn’t moving in five days, we’ll get someone up here to move it so we can all get out from under these damn kamikaze attacks.”

Buckner meticulously assessed all potential courses of action. He recognized the necessity of maintaining available forces for the forthcoming Phases IIIc and III d, a consideration that tempered his inclination to commit his army excessively to the Okinawa theater while those operations remained pending. Concerns lingered regarding the viability of Minatoga’s beaches and terrain for facilitating a swift landing and breakthrough. Additionally, it appeared that Ushijima’s strength was nearly exhausted.

Moreover, Buckner expressed reservations to his staff regarding the feasibility of a Minatoga operation, likening it to “another Anzio, but worse.” This analogy referenced the landing and subsequent siege of the Anzio beachhead in Italy from January to May 1944. Initially anticipated as a swift victory, the operation instead led to protracted and challenging engagements that ensnared Allied forces near Cassino and Rome.

Buckner ultimately directed Geiger’s corps and Bruce’s division to bolster the front lines opposite Shuri. With their deployment completed, Tenth Army would

¹² Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 184–248; and Charles Stearns oral history, Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

initiate a fresh series of offensives aimed at capturing Shuri. This decision to forgo a landing at Minatoga, contentious at the time, remains the most disputed aspect of Buckner's handling of the Battle of Okinawa.¹³



Figure 3. Left to right, Spruance, Nimitz, and Buckner. (Source: US Army)

The redeployments were finalized by the end of April, and the newly arrived troops promptly launched assaults against Ushijima's defenses. Buckner personally visited both the 77th and 1st Marine Divisions to assess their performance. Reflecting on the experience, he noted in his diary, "It was apparent to me that the 77th Div and the 1st Mardiv entered the line expecting to show their superiority over their predecessors by a rapid breakthrough of the enemy's position. . . . They were promptly stopped and learned some valuable lessons today. From now on they will be more valuable as all-around fighters."¹⁴

The intensity of combat escalated during the initial week of May. Tenth Army found itself contending with a determined Japanese counteroffensive, which was

¹³ Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 258–64. See also the discussion later in the article.

¹⁴ Buckner diary, 3 May 1945.

decisively repelled from 4 May to 6 May, resulting in significant losses for Ushijima's forces. On 15 May, Nimitz issued orders to commence Phase III d, coinciding with the auspicious news of Germany's unconditional surrender. Buckner remarked, "At noon every gun of our land and ship support batteries fired one round at the enemy. We then tuned into the Jap radio frequency and announced in Japanese that the volley was in celebration of the victory. Tomorrow we are dropping an extra of our Jap newspaper with elaboration of this news."¹⁵

However, Buckner also lamented the onset of heavy rainfall, which impeded the movement of tanks and slowed the overall advance. This precipitation marked the beginning of a protracted period of torrential downpours, with Okinawa receiving a total of fifteen inches of rain between 7 May and 31 May, with ten inches falling within the final ten days of the month.¹⁶

On 11 May, Tenth Army launched a comprehensive offensive along its entire front line. In the western sector, the 6th Marine Division captured Sugar Loaf Hill after a week of fierce combat, subsequently securing the city and harbor of Naha. Simultaneously, to the east, the 1st Marine Division penetrated the Wana Draw, posing a direct threat to Shuri itself. Further eastward, the 77th and 96th Infantry Divisions of XXIV Corps made significant territorial gains, facilitating the maneuver of the 7th Infantry Division past the Japanese eastern flank at Yonabaru.

In the waters offshore, kamikaze assaults against the Fifth Fleet escalated throughout May. VADM Marc Mitscher, in command of the carriers of Task Force 58, had to escape when kamikaze planes damaged his flagship. Despite the concerted Japanese air campaign aimed at repelling it, the fleet steadfastly maintained its position offshore, providing unwavering support to Tenth Army. Toward the end of May, command of the fleet shifted to ADM William F. Halsey, succeeding the more cautious Vice Admiral Spruance. While Spruance opted to keep his ships near Okinawa, Halsey directed the carriers to launch strikes against air bases within mainland Japan.¹⁷

By 21 May, Tenth Army had gained a decisive advantage. The 7th Infantry and 6th Marine Divisions poised themselves for a pincer movement aimed at encircling Ushijima's defenders. However, adverse weather conditions thwarted further progress. "Heavy rain has stopped our tanks," recorded Buckner, "and is impeding supply just at a time when rapid progress . . . is most desirable."¹⁸

¹⁵ Buckner diary, 8 May 1945.

¹⁶ Buckner diary, 8 May 1945.

¹⁷ For details of this and other fleet operations in this period, see Samuel E. Morison, *Victory In the Pacific* (Boston: Little, Brown 1960), 251–76.

¹⁸ Unless otherwise cited, this section is based on Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 360–461.



Figure 4. American tanks attack Shuri's outer defenses. (Source: US Army)

Ushijima opted for a strategic withdrawal, leaving behind an outpost line to cover the retreat. Although it took several days for American intelligence to discern the Japanese movement, Buckner promptly sprang into action upon receiving the intelligence. “Initiate without delay,” he ordered, “strong and unrelenting pressure to ascertain probable intentions and keep him off balance.” All units surged forward, confronting determined Japanese resistance. The pivotal stronghold of Shuri was captured on 31 May by the 1st Marine Division. “Ushijima missed the boat on his withdrawal from the Shuri Line,” Buckner informed his staff that day. “It’s all over now but cleaning up pockets of resistance. This doesn’t mean there won’t be stiff fighting.”¹⁹

In Tokyo, there was a growing realization that the tide of the battle had turned. “Toward the end of May, however, air operations became gradually deadlocked, and IGHQ felt that it was impossible to turn the tide,” recalled Colonel Hayashi. “Command of the skies over Okinawa lay completely in the hands of the U.S. Air Force; the Japanese Navy had already been rendered impotent. Thus the fate of the Thirty-Second Army was just a matter of time.”²⁰

¹⁹ Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 391, 422.

²⁰ Hayashi, *Kogun*, 143.

By this juncture, it became evident to the Americans that Okinawa held significantly more strategic value as a base than previously acknowledged. Recognizing this, Buckner and others proposed to Nimitz that the island be retained as a US protectorate post-war, rendering other potential bases in the Ryukyus unnecessary. Consequently, on 8 June, Nimitz terminated all remaining phases of Operation Iceberg that had yet to be executed and directed Buckner to focus exclusively on concluding the battle on Okinawa.²¹

The remnants of Ushijima's decimated army, now comprising a mere 30,000 men, entrenched themselves along a hill range six miles south of Shuri. Tenth Army probed these fortified positions before launching a concerted offensive on 9 June. Over the course of eight days of relentless combat, the Americans systematically dismantled each Japanese stronghold. Ushijima's positions were subjected to relentless bombardment from artillery and airstrikes, with American tanks providing support for infantry assaults. In certain instances, gasoline was utilized to flush out entrenched defenders from caves and bunkers, which were then set ablaze. Despite Ushijima's orders for counterattacks, each attempt met with resounding failure.²²

Simultaneously, the 6th Marine Division redirected its efforts towards neutralizing the Japanese naval units safeguarding Oroku peninsula. Employing amphibious and ground assaults, the Marines encircled the 4,000 defenders situated amid the hills at the peninsula's heart. Over the course of ten days, the Marines systematically cleared the hills, gradually eradicating Japanese resistance.²³

Buckner sensed that victory was within reach. On 10 June, he made an appeal to Ushijima to cease resistance, but received no response. "We have passed the speculative phase of the campaign," he told his staff on 15 June, "and are down to the final kill."²⁴

Unfortunately, Buckner did not live to witness the ultimate triumph. While visiting the 8th Marine Regiment on 18 June 1945, he fell victim to Japanese artillery fire—the highest-ranking American casualty inflicted by enemy forces in both World War II and the twentieth century. On 19 June, Geiger announced his promotion to lieutenant general and assumed command of Tenth Army, thereby be-

²¹ Buckner diary, 23 April and 8 June 1945.

²² Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 422–54.

²³ Appleman et al, *Okinawa*, 422–54.

²⁴ Buckner correspondence, 16 June 1945, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

coming the first (and only) US Marine and aviator of any service to command an American field army.²⁵

Undeterred, Tenth Army pressed forward with renewed determination under Geiger's leadership. Meanwhile, US Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall designated GEN Joseph W. Stilwell as the new permanent commander of Tenth Army. On 22 June, Geiger officially declared Okinawa secure and presided over a ceremonial flag raising. The following day, Stilwell arrived on the island and assumed command.²⁶

Fighting persisted for another week as Stilwell directed a methodical advance northward. In the waning days of June 1945, Tenth Army inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese, resulting in 8,975 enemy fatalities and more than 2,900 prisoners captured. Thousands of disoriented civilians emerged from hiding in caves. On 2 July 1945, major combat operations on Okinawa concluded, and Operation Iceberg officially ended. It had been 91 days since Buckner led his forces ashore at Hagushi.²⁷

The Battle of Okinawa: Key Lessons

World War II in the Pacific epitomized a conflict where all three services—land, sea, and air—had to synchronize their efforts to secure victory. The success of any single service was contingent upon the cooperation and effectiveness of the others. This principle applied equally to both American and Japanese forces, underscoring the indispensability of joint operations. By various metrics, the Pacific theater stands out as the most integrated theater in which the United States military has ever engaged. Reflecting on the invasion of Okinawa in the context of potential future conflicts over Taiwan or other Pacific islands, three primary lessons emerge.

²⁵ Stephen R. Taaffe, *Commanding the Pacific: Marine Corps Generals in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 2021), 172; Roger Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear: A Biography of the Late General Roy S. Geiger* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 1968), 302. Wallace asserted he should assume command as the senior officer on the island. Geiger, backed by Hodge, cited amphibious doctrine favoring combatant generals in command succession; he also noted Buckner's preference for Geiger to succeed him. Wallace gave way at that point.

²⁶ Taaffe, *Commanding the Pacific*, 172–73; Willock, *Unaccustomed to Fear*, 302–03. For more on Stilwell's selection, see Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–45* (New York: Mcmillan, 1971), 518–20. Stilwell's background and activities earlier in World War II are discussed in Kolakowski, *Nations In the Balance*. The relevant messages are in the MacArthur Memorial Archives, Record Group 4.

²⁷ Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience*, 471–74.

The Ground Battle Is Paramount

It may appear self-evident, but in a battle aimed at seizing control of an island, the advancement of ground forces dictates the tempo. Regardless of triumphs at sea or in the air, the progress made on land is the linchpin for achieving the objective.

Both Spruance and Turner understood this fundamental truth, having overseen numerous intricate amphibious operations prior to Iceberg. Throughout those campaigns, Spruance consistently orchestrated Fifth Fleet's movements to provide optimal protection to the beachhead and the vulnerable transport and supply vessels. Additionally, he ensured that the forces deployed onshore received ample naval gunfire support. These same priorities guided Spruance during his tenure off the shores of Okinawa.

Turner, for his part, acknowledged the necessity of sustaining and bolstering Buckner's efforts. The amicable rapport and mutual respect shared between the two men fostered a collaborative environment, facilitating smooth interactions between their respective commands. Turner's supportive demeanor was particularly evident during the discussions in late April regarding the potential envelopment landing at Minatoga.

Elwyn Post, Buckner's chief of staff, recounted that "General Buckner wanted very much to make the landings on the southern shore" at Minatoga. He studied the matter thoroughly, discussed it at length with Admiral Turner, and the commanders involved. It was only after he had weighed all factors that he dismissed the plan as being too hazardous . . . Admiral Turner stood ready to back any decision of General Buckner's which he considered his forces could support. He considered General Buckner's decision correct and sound."²⁸

At theater headquarters, Admiral Nimitz comprehended the pivotal importance of Tenth Army's success in securing Okinawa. However, Nimitz was also acutely aware of the steep costs involved, particularly during periods when the ground battle appeared to be at a standstill. This awareness is evident in his remarks to Buckner on 23 April regarding the losses sustained by the fleet. Nevertheless, as the campaign unfolded, Nimitz publicly defended Buckner against criticisms of sluggish progress.

Nimitz was not alone among naval officers in supporting the efforts of the ground forces. "Faced with such defensive works as General Ushijima devised," recalled Samuel E. Morison, an Okinawa veteran, "no army on earth could have done better than General Buckner's Tenth."²⁹

²⁸ Eddie Post, correspondence with John Stevens, 19 June 1946, NARA.

²⁹ Morison, *Victory In the Pacific*, 242.

Projections of a potential battle for Taiwan mirror the dynamics of Iceberg, with a fleet facilitating the landing and sustaining ground operations through an extended deployment. Once deployed, the ships are constrained to the beachhead area with limited operational range until the outcome of the ground battle is determined. If the ground campaign falters or reaches a stalemate, the fleet could remain committed for an extended period. Senior leaders of an invading force would likely encounter similar challenges and dilemmas as those faced during Operation Iceberg. The lessons gleaned from the experiences of Okinawa provide valuable insights for planners and operators to consider and anticipate.

Airpower Decides the Offshore Battle

The offshore battle is primarily for surface dominance, yet its outcome is ultimately determined in the air. This principle was clearly reflected in American tactics off the coast of Okinawa. Spruance's fleet strategically positioned destroyers at advanced radar picket stations to provide early detection of approaching enemy strikes. Each individual ship employed its own antiaircraft fire, damage control measures, and maneuvering techniques for self-defense. While these methods were effective, a crucial aspect of the fleet's defense lay in its airpower, manifested through combat air patrols conducted by carrier-based air groups and fighters stationed in Okinawa by the Army and Marine Corps. Moreover, American aircraft successfully sank the Yamato battleship when it attempted to intervene and launched strikes on Japanese air bases, significantly hampering their ability to launch attacks on the fleet. As the battle progressed, it became increasingly evident that American air superiority was insurmountable, ensuring that the invasion fleet would continue to provide support to the ground battle until its conclusion.

The significance of air dominance had been underscored in preceding island battles. During the May 1941 conflict off Crete, German airpower engaged the British Royal Navy while German paratroopers confronted Allied ground forces on the island itself. A German historian described the offshore battle as "the first major air-sea conflict in war history," highlighting how German planes, leveraging air supremacy, relentlessly attacked British ships. "After suffering severe loss the British fleet was compelled to withdraw and the fate of Crete was sealed."³⁰

³⁰ Cajus Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries* (New York: Ballantine 1964), 288.



Figure 5. A kamikaze is about to strike USS Missouri off Okinawa. (Source: US Navy)

The Americans encountered a comparable situation just over a year later during the Guadalcanal campaign. Japanese air and surface assaults compelled the invasion fleet to retreat, leaving the 1st Marine Division isolated. Supply and reinforcement proved challenging for the Americans, while the Japanese bolstered their forces and launched offensives. Following several decisive battles in October and November 1942 that tilted air superiority in favor of the United States, the tide turned; the Japanese evacuated the area in early February 1943.³¹

Fighting around Taiwan, encompassing the region of the Taiwan Strait, would likely mirror the patterns observed in the aforementioned cases, involving assaults on surface vessels from both aircraft and missiles, and a contest to establish and maintain air dominance. However, there would be one notable distinction, as none of these historical examples included a significant underwater threat. Conflicts in and around Taiwan are poised to feature a substantial undersea dimension, with offshore fleets contending for supremacy beneath the waves. The developments beneath the ocean's surface may wield comparable influence to the aerial confrontation in shaping the outcome of the invasion.

³¹ There are many fine histories of the Guadalcanal campaign. One of the most detailed is Richard Frank, *Guadalcanal* (New York: Penguin 1992). See also Fuji Yu, "An Island Too Far: Lessons From Guadalcanal for EABO" *Proceedings* 150, no. 3 (March 2024): 46–50, <https://www.usni.org/>.

Local Bases Are Essential

Both Operation Iceberg's adversaries relied heavily on local bases. Okinawa lay within the effective reach of Japanese air and naval resources, both from the home islands and other strategic locations, which the Japanese fully utilized during the operation.

Recognizing the necessity of a nearby base, the United States targeted Kerama Retto as Operation Iceberg's initial objective. Throughout the campaign, this island group served as a crucial American anchorage, providing vital facilities for repair, replenishment, and recuperation. Many damaged vessels underwent basic repairs there before returning to action or sailing to the United States for more extensive overhaul.

On Okinawa itself and its neighboring islands, American air bases hosted a significant air force that supported Tenth Army's ground operations and conducted combat air patrols over the fleet. The abundance of base facilities on Okinawa was such that Buckner proposed to Nimitz that the island become a US possession after the war, a status it retained until 1972. Even after reverting to Japanese administration, Okinawa continues to host several crucial US bases.

In a potential conflict over Taiwan, the proximity of bases will be a critical factor, as basing closer to the theater of operations conserves resources and strengthens operational efficiency. This consideration raises inquiries about the roles of various locations, including the South China Sea islands, the coastal isles of Quemoy and Matsu, and the Pescadores, in any prospective invasion scenario for Taiwan. With modern weaponry, such an operation would necessitate covering a battlespace at least as expansive as that of Operation Iceberg, if not greater. The expanded battlespace would undoubtedly impact US bases in the Ryukyus (including Okinawa), Guam, South Korea, the Philippines, and Japan itself.

Conclusion

Marine MGen Lemuel Shepherd, who commanded the 6th Marine Division on Okinawa and later served as Commandant of the Marine Corps, accurately stated, "The Okinawa Operation was in many ways the most difficult of the Pacific War. Conceived, launched, and supported at long range, it required meticulous detail in both planning and execution. Bad weather, defenses which employed the rugged terrain with great skill and cunning, and a well-trained, resolute defense force combined to give the enemy an advantage that was overcome only by cour-

age, ingenuity, and endurance of the highest order . . . It is a vital chapter in the history of our nation.”³²

The narrative and insights gleaned from the Battle of Okinawa remain significant. Just as Operation Iceberg offered a glimpse into a potential invasion of Japan itself in 1945, it now provides insights into the dynamics of a prospective invasion of Taiwan nearly eight decades later. The battle holds valuable lessons about integrated sea, air, and land operations where a significant island is the coveted prize and merits comprehensive examination and analysis. ✪

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³² Shepherd is quoted in Nichols and Shaw, *Okinawa*, v.

Charting Thailand's Course

Leveraging Small Navy Strategies to Secure Thailand amid Great-Power Maritime Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

WANPIYA RODJANAGOSON

Abstract

This article examines recommended strategies for Thailand's small navy amid the Indo-Pacific's great-power maritime rivalry. It argues that while Thailand has pursued these strategies, it has only achieved partial success. Synthesizing existing literature, limitations, and case studies, the article establishes a concrete definition of small navy strategies. Utilizing SWOT analysis and the TOWS matrix (strengths and weaknesses against external opportunities and threats), it identifies recommended strategies for Thailand's small navy and compares them with current policies and practices. These insights, previously absent in Thai maritime security literature, are complemented by exclusive information from related policy practitioners. By shedding light on Thailand's case studies, the article offers valuable insights for policy practitioners involved in executing strategies, military operations, and diplomacy in the region.

This article will examine how Thailand can utilize small navy strategies to secure itself amid the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific. It will begin by briefly defining and outlining strategies employed by small navies in the first section. Following this, the article will delve into the historical background of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific and the role of the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) within this context in the second section. In the final section, detailed discussion will be provided on Thailand's utilization of small navy strategies to ensure its security amid the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the contemporary world. This will involve establishing Thailand's status as a state with a small navy, strategically analyzing Thailand's position within this maritime rivalry using SWOT analysis, identifying recommended small navy strategies for Thailand within this context through the TOWS matrix, and ultimately comparing these strategies to contemporary strategy, plans, and practices.

Small Navy: Definition and Strategies

In much of the existing literature, the term *small navy* lacks a precise definition and is often interchangeably referred to using synonyms such as *non-blue water*

*navy, inferior navy, weak navy, smaller naval force, and small and coastal naval power.*¹ These terms typically categorize navies into various ranks based on different criteria, designating those below a certain threshold as small navies.² However, current definitions of *small navy* remain insufficiently concise, as they fail to consider three main functions that navies typically perform, as well as political constraints.³

Considering the defined terms of *small navy*, along with their functions and associated limitations, this article proposes a refined definition. A *small navy* is characterized as a naval force whose capabilities and flexibility enable it to primarily undertake constabulary missions as its main naval objective, alongside certain military and diplomatic missions ranging from symbolic presence to nonautonomous operations beyond exclusive economic zones (EEZ) within a specific timeframe. This classification stems from the constraints experienced by these navies during the aforementioned period, which may include limitations on the number and variety of warships within the fleet, the quality of warships and associated equipment, the adequacy of naval support components (such as naval aviation, naval industry, and supplementary naval organizations like separate coast guards and marine corps), the allocation of national resources related to naval power (includ-

¹ Basil Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective: Deconstructing the Hierarchy of Naval Forces," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 43–44 & 49; Michael A. Morris, *Expansion of the Third World Navies*, 1st ed. (London: Macmillan, 1987), 22; Michael Lindberg, *Geographical Impact on Coastal Defense Navies: The Entwinning of Force Structure, Technology and Operational Environment*, 1st ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 15; and Peter T. Haydon, "Naval Diplomacy: Is It Relevant in the 21st Century," in *The Politics of Maritime Power*, ed. Andrew T.H. Tan (London: Routledge, 2007), 73.

² Haydon, "Naval Diplomacy," 73; Morris, *Expansion of the Third World Navies*, 18, 22 & 24; Ian Speller, Deborah Sanders, and Michael Mulqueen, "Introduction," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 7; Michael Lindberg, *Geographical Impact on Coastal Defense Navies*, 14–37; Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed. (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 113–20; Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, *Traite de Strategie* (Paris: Institut de stratégie comparée EPHE IV, 2008), 617–21. Quoted in Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective," 36; Braber and Sipos, *The Future Maritime Environment*, 165–75. Quoted in Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective," 37; and Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 237–40.

³ Germond, "Small Navies in Perspective," 37; and Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 237–40; Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2014), 16; Ian Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 218; Basil Germond, "Seapower and Small Navies: A Post-Modern Outlook," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 26; Alessio Patalano, "Naval Warfare," in *Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies*, ed. David J. Galbreath and John R. Deni (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 201; Geoffrey Till, "Are Small Navies Different?," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 26–27.

ing military budgets, naval infrastructure like bases, professional qualifications, and personnel numbers), and political support.

In terms of comparative studies, it is evident that there are five primary small navy strategies aimed at securing themselves against external tensions and non-traditional maritime risks, while simultaneously pursuing national ambitions within the constraints they face.

1. *International maritime and naval cooperation* entails the utilization of naval assets and diplomatic frameworks, either independently or within collective security institutions, to collaborate with other states. This collaboration aims to effectively manage external tensions and non-traditional maritime risks (for operational purposes), foster stronger maritime and naval relationships with other states and their navies (for diplomatic purposes), and adopt best practices from other navies and related entities to enhance force development (for force development purposes). Examples of such cooperation include antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden during the 2010s, the deployment of Vietnamese frigates to the 70th anniversary celebration of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of China in 2019, and the continuous participation of the PLAN in joint antipiracy operations since 2008, serving as a "real-world blue-water operations laboratory" for China.⁴
2. *International maritime and naval institutional building* involves the recognition that states with small navies may lack the resources or manpower to fulfill all naval and maritime commitments independently. Instead, they may opt to establish and engage in collective security institutions. These institutions typically feature "common operational language and procedures, unified command and control, shared rules of engagement, free exchange of intelligence, and concerted naval procurement and planning" among

⁴ Michael McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, 1st ed. (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 2020), 19, 28–32, 34, 39–40; Christopher W. Hughes, Alessio Patalano, and Robert Ward, "Japan's Grand Strategy: The Abe Era and Its Aftermath," *Survival* 63, no. 1 (2021): 139, <https://doi.org/>; Collin Koh, "Best Little Navy in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Republic of Singapore Navy," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 127–29; L.S. Sin, "Malaysia Is Asia's 1st to Charge Somali Pirates," *USA Today*, 2011, <https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/>; Alex Richardson, "REFILE-Malaysian Navy Foils Hijack Attempt off Oman," *Reuters*, 22 January 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and Hai Quan, "Two Vietnamese Frigates Visit China," *VietnamNet*, 15 April 2019, <https://vietnamnet.vn/>.

member states.⁵ Within such capable collective institutions, specific small navies can focus on niche specialization, allowing them to allocate limited resources to prioritize commitments to the institution over other duties.⁶ However, this strategy may entail risks, including the delegation of tasks to other members, potential involvement in conflicts of other members, and the possibility of sacrificing decisional sovereignty. Notably, this strategy is primarily observed within institutions like NATO and the European Union.⁷

3. *Naval force multiplier*, as synthesized from existing literature on force multiplication, is a strategy aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of naval forces through the synergistic effects of various defense inputs, whether tangible or intangible.⁸ Tangible enhancements involve the acquisition and utilization of physical resources such as technology and infrastructure, achieved through avenues such as international procurement, state donations, domestic development, and collaborative international development programs.⁹ Examples of this approach include the Royal New Zealand Navy's engagement of a Canadian company to upgrade their frigate surveillance, self-defense, and combat systems to meet ANZAC standards in 2014; Estonia receiving donated warships from Denmark in 1994, 2000, and 2006; the Republic of Korea's capacity to produce landing platform docks (LPD), frigates, and patrol vessels since 2007; the joint development program between the Netherlands and Belgium for multi-

⁵ Geoffrey Till, "Small Navies in the Current Strategic Context," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 20; *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, November 2021* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 2021), 40; Jeremy Stöhs, "European Small(Er) Navies: Failure and Success in Doing More with Less," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 95.

⁶ Stöhs, "European Small(Er) Navies," 95.

⁷ Till, "Small Navies in the Current Strategic Context," 20.

⁸ Cambridge Dictionary, "Force Multiplier Definition," 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>; W. J. Hurley, "A Clarification of the Concepts of Force Multiplier and Returns to Force Scale," *Defence and Peace Economics* 16, no. 6 (2005), 463, <https://doi.org/>; Andrew Mallia and Chris Xuereb, "Special Effects: Force Multipliers and Small Navies," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 42.

⁹ Mallia and Xuereb, "Special Effects," 42–44.

purpose frigates; and the establishment of Singapore's Changi Naval Base in the early 2000s.¹⁰

4. States with small navies can also enhance their naval force effectiveness through intangible means, focusing on human resources development and procurement from both domestic and international sources, as well as administrative and organizational reforms.¹¹ Examples of this approach include the Maritime Squadron of the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) sending naval cadets and staff for training in naval colleges abroad, leading to a transformation into an effective constabulary navy; the Royal New Zealand Navy's recruitment of secondment naval staff from the Royal Australian Navy to address manpower shortages; the Republic of Singapore Navy's merger of its LPD squadrons to address human resource shortages; the establishment of the Naval Aviation branch by the Vietnamese navy in 2013; and Ukraine's restructuring of its mosquito fleet in response to threats from the Russian Navy.¹²

¹⁰ "Anzac Frigate Systems Upgrade," New Zealand Ministry of Defense, July 2022, <https://www.defence.govt.nz/>; Johnny E. Balsved, "Two Former Minelayers Sold to Estonia," *Danish Naval History*, 1 August 2006, <http://www.navalhistory.dk/>; Ian Bowers, "The Republic of Korea Navy—A 'Big' Small Navy," in *Small Navies Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 101–03; Anselm Van Der Peet, "The Royal Netherlands Navy after the Cold War: Working with a New Doctrine in a New Security Environment," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 113; and Ronnie Tay, "Speech by Chief of Navy, Rear-Admiral Ronnie Tay, at the Opening Ceremony of Changi Naval Base" (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 21 May 2004), <https://www.nas.gov.sg/>.

¹¹ Mallia and Xuereb, "Special Effects," 45.

¹² Ciarán Lowe, "A Comparative Analysis of Policy and Practice within Three Small Navies: Croatia, Ireland and Malta," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 188; Steven Paget, "The 'Best Small Nation Navy in the World'? The Twenty-First Century Royal New Zealand Navy," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2016), 246, <https://doi.org/>; Ng Eng Hen, "Speech by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Manpower and 2nd Minister for Defence at Launch of RSS *Supreme*" (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 9 May 2006), <https://www.nas.gov.sg/>; Koh, "Best Little Navy in Southeast Asia," 122–23; Truong-Minh Vu and Nguyen The Phuong, "Naval Development in Vietnam," in *Naval Modernisation in Southeast Asia Problems and Prospects for Small and Medium Navies*, ed. Geoffrey Till and Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 98; Deborah Sanders, "Rebuilding the Ukrainian Navy: Maritime Security in a Highly Contested Environment," in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security Balancing Traditional Roles and Emergent Threats in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 174; "Strategy of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2035," Naval Forces of the Armed Forces Ukraine, 11 January 2019, <https://navy.mil.gov.ua/>; and Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 66.

5. *Maritime and naval hedging strategy*, as synthesized from existing literature on hedging strategy within the field of international relations, involves states with small navies proactively diversifying their naval and maritime relationships to mitigate vulnerabilities in their naval capabilities.¹³ This strategy aims to deter overreliance on or vulnerability to specific great powers by expanding engagements across various aspects of maritime cooperation, technological procurement, infrastructure development, technological advancements, joint operations, exercises, and training. Concurrently, these states seek to strengthen relationships with other small navies to serve as cooperative strategic balancers in the maritime domain. This strategy finds application among Southeast Asian nations with small navies.¹⁴
6. *Naval strategic communication* involves the utilization of communication by naval organizations to uphold their policies, operations, and activities, as well as those of their alliances. While various methods exist for employing strategic communication within naval organizations, including public diplomacy and informational operations, the use of military public affairs to garner political support from the domestic audience for specific naval policies, operations, and activities stands out as the most prominent means available to small navies for bolstering other small navy strategies within certain limitations.¹⁵ A notable example is Japan's successful militarization efforts between 2012 and 2020, achieved through the publication of serialized manga editions by the Ministry of Defense (MOD) to overcome political constraints.¹⁶

¹³ Anders Wivel, "The Grand Strategies of Small States," in *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, ed. Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 499; Mohammad Salman, "Strategic Hedging and Unipolarity's Demise: The Case of China's Strategic Hedging," *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 3 (2017), 356, <https://doi.org/>; Evan S. Medeiros, "Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia Pacific Stability," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005), 146, <https://doi.org/>; Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008), 165, <https://doi.org/>; Øystein Tunsjø, "U.S.–China Relations From Unipolar Hedging toward Bipolar Balancing," in *Strategic Adjustment and The Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø (London: Cornell University Press, 2017), 41; and Jürgen Haacke, "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019), 377–79, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁴ *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (Hanoi: ASEAN, 2020), <https://asean.org/>; Quan, "Two Vietnamese Frigates Visit China"; and Vu and Phuong, "Naval Development in Vietnam," 96.

¹⁵ "Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communication" (press release, NATO 12 August 2010), <https://info.publicintelligence.net/>.

¹⁶ Matthew Brummer and Eitan Oren, "We Must Protect This Peace with Our Hands': Strategic Culture and Japan's Use of Force in International Disputes as Depicted in Ministry of Defense Manga Promotional Materials," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, no. special (2022): 94–106, <https://doi.org/>.

Historical Background: Great-Power Maritime Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

Maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific region, defined as the area encompassing the western coast of the Indian Ocean to the western shore of the United States, has indeed been a significant aspect of geopolitics since the twentieth century.¹⁷

During the early twentieth century, a complex maritime rivalry emerged among several great powers, including the British Empire, the United States, the Russian Empire (later the Soviet Union after 1917), and Imperial Japan. This rivalry was manifested in various ways, such as the projection of naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 is a notable example of this competition.

During World War I, the Indo-Pacific region did witness significant great-power rivalry, although it was not as pronounced as in other theaters of the conflict. The main focus of the war was in Europe, with the major naval powers, including Britain, Germany, and to a lesser extent Japan, primarily engaging in naval activities in the Mediterranean regions.¹⁸

However, there were notable instances of maritime rivalry in the Indo-Pacific during World War I. For example, Germany's East Asia Squadron, under the command of Admiral Maximilian von Spee, operated in the Pacific Ocean, engaging in battles such as the Battle of Coronel off the coast of Chile in November 1914.¹⁹ This squadron aimed to disrupt Allied shipping and extend German influence in the region, posing a challenge to British naval dominance.

Additionally, Japan, as an ally of the Allied Powers, played a significant role in naval operations in the Indo-Pacific during World War I.²⁰ The Imperial Japanese Navy operated in support of Allied efforts, particularly in safeguarding shipping routes and countering German naval activities in East Asia and the Pacific.²¹

Thus, while the Indo-Pacific was not the primary theater of naval conflict during World War I, there were notable instances of great-power rivalry and naval

¹⁷ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, 1 December 2017), 45–46, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

¹⁸ Timothy D. Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation, 1914-1918," *Naval War College Review* 53, no. 1 (2000), 62–63, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

¹⁹ Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation, 1914-1918," 64.

²⁰ Amon Kiilleen, "Japan's Victory in World War I: A Review of Japan's Role as a Principal Great War Victor Highlights Critical Lessons From Naval History," *Naval History Magazine*, June 2021, <https://www.usni.org/>.

²¹ Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation 1914-1918," 63–64 & 67.

engagement in the region, particularly involving Germany's East Asia Squadron and Japan's role as an ally of the Allied Powers.²²

During the interwar period (1918–1939), maritime rivalry between the British Empire and the Soviet Union manifested notably in their competition for influence in the strategically significant regions of Iran and the Caucasus. This rivalry stemmed from both powers' interests in securing access to vital resources, particularly oil, and establishing geopolitical footholds in the heart of the Eurasian landmass.

From the 1920s to 1934, the British Empire and the Soviet Union engaged in diplomatic maneuvers, covert operations, and proxy conflicts to assert their influence in Iran and the Caucasus. The British sought to maintain their historical dominance in the region and safeguard their imperial interests, including securing oil concessions and maintaining access to key trade routes. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union aimed to expand its sphere of influence, consolidate control over neighboring territories, and promote communist ideologies.²³

However, as the interwar period progressed, the dynamics of the British-USSR maritime rivalry began to shift. The emergence of Nazi Germany as a potent and expansionist threat to both powers in Europe forced them to reassess their strategic priorities. Recognizing the need to confront the common Nazi threat, the British Empire and the Soviet Union gradually transitioned from adversaries to strategic partners in certain aspects of their maritime affairs.²⁴

This transformation from rivalry to interdependence was particularly evident in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific, where the British Empire and the USSR found themselves facing common challenges posed by Nazi Germany's ambitions and aggression.²⁵ As the Nazi threat loomed larger, both powers recognized the imperative of coordinating their naval strategies, sharing intelligence, and cooperating on maritime defense initiatives to counter the growing menace.

Ultimately, the exigencies of confronting the Nazi threat fostered a pragmatic convergence of interests between the British Empire and the USSR in the maritime domain. This newfound interdependence facilitated greater cooperation and coordination between the two powers in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific, laying the groundwork for broader collaboration during World War II.²⁶

²² Saxon, "Anglo-Japanese Naval Cooperation 1914-1918," 63–64; and Howard M. Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific: 1904-1949," in *Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Howard M. Hensel and Amit Gupta (New York: Routledge, 2021), 42 & 67.

²³ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 52.

²⁴ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 62–63.

²⁵ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 69.

²⁶ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 52 & 69.

In World War II (1939–1945), the maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific intensified significantly, culminating in naval warfare between Imperial Japan and the Allied Powers, particularly the British Empire and the United States. The attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan on 7 December 1941, stands as a pivotal moment that propelled the conflict to new heights of intensity and global involvement.

Following the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Imperial Japan swiftly expanded its military operations across the Pacific, seizing control of numerous strategic territories and launching aggressive naval campaigns. The Japanese Imperial Navy, bolstered by its formidable carrier-based airpower, posed a formidable threat to Allied naval forces and shipping routes throughout the region.²⁷

In response to Japan's aggressive expansion, the Allied Powers, led by the United States and the British Empire, launched extensive naval operations to counter Japanese advances and regain lost territories. Naval battles such as the Battle of Midway in June 1942 and the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 marked critical turning points in the Pacific Theater, halting Japan's momentum and shifting the balance of naval power in favor of the Allies.²⁸

The maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean Basin also saw heightened tensions and strategic maneuvering as both Axis and Allied powers sought to control vital sea lanes and maritime resources. Naval engagements such as the Battle of the Indian Ocean and the Battle of Ceylon underscored the strategic importance of the region and the fierce competition for naval dominance.²⁹

Overall, World War II witnessed a dramatic escalation of maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean Basin and the Western Pacific, with naval warfare playing a crucial role in shaping the outcome of the conflict and determining the course of global history.³⁰

Following World War II, the global geopolitical landscape underwent a profound transformation, transitioning into a bipolar world order characterized by decolonization and the rise of two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union. The annihilation of Imperial Japan, the decline of the British Empire, and the ascendancy of the US and the USSR reshaped international dynamics and set the stage for the Cold War era (1949–1991).

During the Cold War period, the Indian Ocean basin and the Western Pacific became arenas of maritime rivalry between the US and the USSR. With the emer-

²⁷ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 57, 58 & 68.

²⁸ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 60, 61 & 68.

²⁹ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 58.

³⁰ Hensel, "The Great Powers Struggle for the Indian Ocean," 69.

gence of numerous newly independent littoral states in these regions, both superpowers sought to exert influence and establish strategic control through naval competition and an arms race.

The US and the USSR engaged in a comprehensive contest for naval supremacy, vying for dominance in key maritime areas and seeking to secure alliances with littoral states. This rivalry played out through various means, including the deployment of naval assets, military aid to allied states, and strategic maneuvers to project power and influence.³¹

While China emerged as a significant player on the global stage since the 1970s, it remained largely sidelined in the maritime rivalry between the US and the USSR. China's prioritization of economic development led to the allocation of limited national resources away from building robust naval capabilities, thus precluding its active participation in the naval arms race between the superpowers.³²

Overall, the Cold War era witnessed intense maritime competition between the US and the USSR in the Indian Ocean basin and the Western Pacific, underscoring the strategic significance of these regions in the broader geopolitical context of the time.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the global geopolitical landscape underwent a significant shift towards a monopolar world order within the context of globalization. With the dissolution of the USSR, the United States emerged as the sole dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region. During this period, there was a notable absence of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the region.

The demise of the Soviet Union left the United States as the predominant naval force in the Indo-Pacific, with no other great power capable of challenging its maritime supremacy. While Russia, as the successor state to the USSR, was undergoing a period of transition and had yet to fully recover its naval capabilities, China's naval modernization efforts were still in progress and had not reached a level where it could rival the United States in the region.³³

³¹ Howard M. Hensel, "Decolonization and the Cold War in Indian Ocean and the West Pacific: 1945-1991," in *Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Howard M. Hensel and Amit Gupta (New York: Routledge, 2021), 100.

³² Sing Yue Chan, *China's Maritime Security Strategy: The Evolution of a Growing Sea Power*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 60-61.

³³ Robert Haddick, "Maritime Strategic Developments in the Indian Ocean and the West Pacific since the End of the Cold War," in *Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Howard M. Hensel and Amit Gupta (New York: Routledge, 2021), 116-17; Chan, *China's Maritime Security Strategy*, 87, 152-53; and McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power*, 19, 34, 39 & 40.

As a result, the post-Cold War era witnessed a relative absence of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific. The United States stood as the undisputed naval hegemon in the region, exerting significant influence and projecting power across the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific theater.

In the 2010s, as the world transitioned towards a multipolar order within the context of globalization, a complex maritime rivalry emerged among the great powers — the United States, China, and Russia — in the Indo-Pacific region. This rivalry represents a significant departure from the dynamics of the first half of the 20th century and has reintroduced intricate geopolitical challenges to the region.

For China, navalism and maritime expansion in the Indo-Pacific have become indispensable tools for safeguarding national integrity and sustaining international maritime trade.³⁴ Similarly, for Russia, maritime endeavors in the region offer avenues to capitalize on new economic opportunities and mitigate the effects of Western sanctions, particularly in response to events such as the annexation of Crimea, which has been intensified by the armed conflict in Ukraine.³⁵ The expansion of China and Russia's naval presence in the Indo-Pacific poses a considerable threat to the interests of the United States and its allies.

Consequently, since the 2010s, the three great powers and their respective allies have engaged in a competitive struggle for dominance in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific. This competition has intensified over time, driven by a complex interplay of reciprocal and adversarial relationships. Key factors contributing to this rivalry include the implementation of maritime and naval doctrines, strategic fleet mobilizations, the pursuit of naval force multipliers, and efforts to forge or disrupt international maritime and naval cooperation agreements.³⁶

³⁴ Xinhua, "Xi Jinping stresses the need to show greater care about the ocean," quoted in McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power*, 6.

³⁵ Geoffrey Gresh, *To Rule Eurasia's Waves: The New Great Power Competition at Sea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 205, 207 & 241.

³⁶ Gresh, *To Rule Eurasia's Waves*, 205, 207 & 241; Yu Jie and Jon Wallace, "What Is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?," Chatham House, 13 September 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>; Chan, *China's Maritime Security Strategy*, 151–53; "Chinese, Russian Navies Sail into Contested Japanese East China Sea Waters," *ABC News* (Australia), 9 June 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/>; "Russia Deploys More Surface-to-Air Missiles in Crimean Build-Up," *Reuters*, 13 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/>; "Trilateral Naval Drills between China, Russia and Iran Start on Friday," *Reuters*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and William Choong, "The Return of the Indo-Pacific Strategy: An Assessment," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 5 (2019), 416 & 418, <https://doi.org/>.

Historical Background: The Royal Thai Navy's Roles in Great-Power Maritime Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

Amid the rise of imperialism, the inception of the modern Thai Navy under the absolutist regime occurred through the centralization of fragmented naval entities, culminating in the establishment of the Department of Navy in 1890. During this period, Thailand's naval modernization efforts were primarily influenced by European powers. While Thailand did acquire some warships from imperial European states, such as a corvette and four gunboats from France in 1865, and two small coast defense vessels from the British Empire in 1924 and 1928, it notably opted to engage smaller non-imperial European states, such as Denmark and Sweden, as advisors for modernizing its navy.³⁷

Following a series of administrative reforms, the Department of Navy underwent a transformation, officially becoming the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) in 1933, a year after the Siamese Revolution. Against the backdrop of rising nationalism and the turmoil of World War II (1930s–1945), Thailand and the RTN shifted their allegiances from European powers to cultivate a cordial relationship with the Axis Powers, particularly Imperial Japan. This strategic pivot saw the RTN's deployment to annex provinces lost to French Indochina in 1940, with political support from Imperial Japan resulting in both a strategic victory and successful territorial claims.³⁸

Furthermore, the RTN formulated plans to bolster its naval capabilities by acquiring a cruiser from Fascist Italy and four submarines from Imperial Japan in 1941. However, these plans were thwarted by the conclusion of World War II in 1945, which saw the defeat of the Axis Powers and the subsequent halt of procurement efforts by the RTN.³⁹

Since the early Cold War era in 1950, Thailand forged a close alliance with the United States, resulting in the monopolization of RTN force development by US assistance. The RTN became intricately involved in supporting US naval missions in East Asia, with the United States providing extensive aid and support to Thailand's naval capabilities.

Specifically, the United States donated surplus weaponry to Thailand, including used frigates such as HMS *Tha Chin*, HMS *Pra Sae*, and HMS *Pinklao*. Additionally, the US extended credits to Thailand for the purchase and maintenance of

³⁷ James Goldrick and Jack McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia: A Comparative Study*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 154.

³⁸ Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia*, 155.

³⁹ Goldrick and McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia*, 155.

weapons, facilitating the acquisition of unused frigates like HMS *Tapi* and HMS *Kirirath*.⁴⁰ This assistance package encompassed various aspects, ranging from training programs and joint naval drills to infrastructure development initiatives. Furthermore, the United States generously supplied forty-five naval aviators to Thailand at no cost.⁴¹

As part of the alliance agreement, Thailand was prohibited from purchasing weapons from other countries.⁴² In exchange for US assistance, the RTN committed to supporting any US naval missions directed against the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC). This included deploying two corvettes and a logistic vessel to assist in UN missions during the Korean War between 1950 and 1955, as well as deploying two warships to aid the US in the Vietnam War between 1966 and 1972.⁴³

Since 1972, the RTN has actively sought to diversify its relationships and reduce its dependence on the United States for force development. This strategic shift is evidenced by the RTN's procurement of naval assets from a variety of sources and its engagement with multiple foreign navies.⁴⁴

One notable example of this diversification is the acquisition of naval vessels from different countries. For instance, the RTN purchased the frigate HMS *Makut Rajakuman* from the United Kingdom, which was commissioned in 1973.⁴⁵ Additionally, the RTN procured four frigates from China—HMS *Chao Phraya* (commissioned in 1991), HMS *Bang Pakong* (commissioned in 1991), HMS *Sai Buri* (commissioned in 1992), and HMS *Kabi* (commissioned in 1992), resulting in the establishment of Frigate Squadron 2 in 1992.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in a significant

⁴⁰ Taweewuth Pongsapipatt (Retired Admiral and Former Deputy Supreme Commander), interview by the author, Nakhon Pathom, 11 December 2023; and Strategic Analyst no. 679, "Wiwattanakan-Khong-Kong-Thab-Ruea: Mum-Mong-Dan-Yutthasat (วิวัฒนาการของกองทัพเรือ: มุมมองด้านยุทธศาสตร์—Historical Development of the Royal Thai Navy: A Strategic Perspective)," *Naval Strategic Studies Journal*, n.d., 103, <http://www.navedu.navy.mi.th/>.

⁴¹ Strategic Analyst no. 679, "Wiwattanakan-Khong-Kong-Thab-Ruea," 102–03.

⁴² Pongsapipatt interview.

⁴³ Pongsapipatt interview; "Songkarm-Kao-Lee (สงครามเกาหลี - Korean War)," in *Anusorn-Nai-Ngan-Prarachatan-Preng-Sop-Pol-Ruea-Tri-Sawaeng-Dueng-Chan (อนุสรณ์พระราชทานเพลิงศพพลเรือตรี แสงดวงจันทร์ - Cremation Volume of Rear Admiral Sawaeng Duengchan)* (Rattthara Publisher, 2005), 55–58; and Strategic Analyst no. 679, "Wiwattanakan-Khong-Kong-Thab-Ruea," 104.

⁴⁴ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁴⁵ "R.L. Makut-Rajakumarn (ร.ล.มกุฏราชกุมาร - HTMS Makut Rajakumarn)" (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 24 May 2022), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

⁴⁶ "Pravat-Kong-Ruea-Frigate-Ti-Song (ประวัติกองเรือฟริเกตที่ 2 - History of Frigate Squadron 2)" (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 2, RTN, 29 December 2016), 2023, <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

development, the RTN acquired an air carrier, HMS *Chakri Narubeth*, from Spain in 1992, which was commissioned in 1997.⁴⁷

Moreover, the RTN has pursued a policy of international training and collaboration, sending its naval cadets and staff for training and educational programs abroad. In addition to the United States, RTN personnel have undergone training and study programs in countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Sweden, and Italy.⁴⁸ This approach reflects the RTN's commitment to enhancing its capabilities through exposure to diverse training environments and best practices from various naval traditions.

Following the conclusion of the Cold War, the RTN underwent a strategic recalibration, shifting its focus towards a broader spectrum of military functions beyond traditional warfare. One significant aspect of this transformation was the RTN's increased involvement in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) efforts within the ASEAN region.⁴⁹

A pivotal moment in the RTN's HA/DR endeavors occurred in 2000 when it mobilized its amphibious vessels to provide assistance during a flood crisis in Sri Lanka.⁵⁰ This deployment showcased the RTN's commitment to regional stability and its capacity to respond effectively to natural disasters, thereby solidifying its reputation as a reliable partner in times of crisis.

Furthermore, the RTN extended its reach by contributing to international peacekeeping efforts. In 2000, the RTN deployed naval forces to support the UN peacekeeping mission in Timor-Leste, demonstrating Thailand's dedication to promoting peace and stability.⁵¹

Additionally, the RTN played a proactive role in combating piracy off the coast of Somalia. Recognizing the threat posed by piracy to maritime trade and security, the RTN dispatched naval assets to participate in Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) on approximately four occasions in 2011.⁵² These deployments were prompted by the alarming increase in piracy incidents, including the ransom of Thai civilian merchant ships.⁵³ By engaging in antipiracy operations, the RTN

⁴⁷ "Pravat-R.L.- Chakri Narubet (ประวัติ รล.จักรีนฤเบศร – A Background of the HTMS Chakri Narubet)," Royal Thai Navy (RTN), 19 July 2022, <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

⁴⁸ Paron Sangkaew (Commander and Lecturer, Naval Education Department), interview by the author, Bangkok, 14 October 2023.

⁴⁹ Thanadet Jitprawat (Commander and Lecturer, Naval Education Department), interview by the author, 7 November 2023.

⁵⁰ Jitprawat interview.

⁵¹ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁵² Pongsapipatt interview.

⁵³ Pongsapipatt interview.

actively contributed to safeguarding maritime commerce and ensuring the safety of seafarers navigating high-risk waters.

Overall, the RTN's shift toward multifaceted military functions beyond traditional warfare reflects its evolving role as a proactive and responsible maritime actor, regionally. Through its engagement in HA/DR missions, peacekeeping operations, and anti-piracy efforts, the RTN has underscored its commitment to promoting peace, stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

Thailand as a State Possessing Small Navy

Based on a synthesized definition of small navies, Thailand is classified as a state possessing a small navy due to several limitations that impede the RTN from autonomously projecting force beyond Thailand's EEZ.

Primarily, the RTN faces constraints in terms of both the quantity and diversity of its warships. With a fleet comprising 70 patrol and coastal combatant vessels, including seven corvettes, 17 mine countermeasures vessels, 17 amphibious vessels, 13 logistic support vessels, one aircraft carrier, and 7 frigates, Thailand lacks cruisers, destroyers, and submarines.⁵⁴ While this fleet is adequate for coastal defense missions within the EEZ, it is insufficient for independent naval operations beyond these maritime domains.

Furthermore, many of the RTN's warships and associated equipment suffer from inadequate quality, primarily due to their outdated nature. For instance, several vessels, such as the corvette *Pin Klao*, corvette *Tapi*, corvette *Makut Rajakumarn*, corvette *Rattanakosin*, and frigate *Chao Phraya*, were commissioned between 1959 and 1991, exceeding 30 years in service.⁵⁵ Additionally, the software utilized in RTN military equipment, notably the Link16 program, has not been updated to meet current international standards, further compromising the navy's operational capabilities.⁵⁶

These limitations underscore the challenges faced by the RTN in effectively projecting force beyond Thailand's EEZ and highlight the need for moderniza-

⁵⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2023* (London: Routledge, 2023), 295–96.

⁵⁵ “R.L. Makut-Rajakumarn”; “R.L. Pin-Klao (ร.ล.ปินเกล้า – HTMS Pin Klao)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 24 May 2022), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>; “R.L. Rattanakosin (ร.ล.รัตนโกสินทร์ – HTMS Rattanakosin)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 5 October 2021), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>; “R.L. Tapi (ร.ล.ต-api – HTMS Tapi)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 1, RTN, 21 June 2022), <http://www.fleet.navy.mi.th/>; and “R.L. Chao-Phraya (ร.ล.เจ้าพระยา – HTMS Chao Phraya)” (fact sheet, Frigate Squadron 2, RTN, 14 October 2020), <http://www2.fleet.navy.mi.th/>.

⁵⁶ Sarun Pecharanon (Lieutenant General and Deputy Director General Secretariat, Ministry of Defence), interview by author, 25 January 2024.

tion and enhancement of naval capabilities to meet contemporary maritime security demands.

Insufficient naval support components pose a significant obstacle to the RTN in autonomously conducting naval missions beyond Thailand's EEZ. Primarily, the RTN's naval aviation force relies on outdated patrol aircraft, and Thailand lacks a dedicated coast guard organization.⁵⁷ Consequently, the RTN must allocate its limited budget and manpower primarily to coastal defense missions, diverting resources from naval operations beyond the EEZ.

Moreover, while the RTN and domestic naval industries can manufacture small and medium patrol vessels for domestic and export purposes, the absence of blue-water warship production capabilities hampers the RTN's ability to expand its naval capabilities.⁵⁸ This limitation restricts the RTN's capacity to undertake autonomous naval missions beyond Thailand's EEZ.

Additionally, the RTN faces challenges related to national capabilities in naval power, including budget allocation and staffing. Despite Thailand's defense budget ranking fourth highest globally in 2024, with approximately 5.69 percent of the total budget allocated to defense, the RTN receives an inadequate share.⁵⁹ The majority of military funding is directed towards the Royal Thai Army and staff welfare, limiting the RTN's ability to enhance its naval capabilities across various domains.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the RTN suffers from a shortage of naval staff at the

⁵⁷ Panitan Wattanayagorn (Security and International Relations Expert), interview by the author, 19 July 2022; Ekapol Nakpum, "Kongthap-Ruea-Thai-Yoklerk-Krongkan-Sue-Kruang-Bin-Ladtrawen-Tang-Talay-Mai-3- Kruang (กองทัพเรือไทยยกเลิกโครงการซื้อเครื่องบินลาดตระเวนทางทะเลใหม่ ๓ เครื่อง—The Royal Thai Navy Cancels the Project on Purchasing 3 New Patrol Aircrafts)," *Aagth Daily Journal* (blog), 7 March 2019, <https://aagth1.blogspot.com/>; "Kong-Ruea-Yarm-Fung (กองเรือยามฝั่ง—Coast Guard Squadron)," Coast Guard Squadron, 16 October 2014, <http://www.coastguard.navy.mi.th/>; and "Nyua-Nyan-Kongthap-Ruea (หน่วยงานกองทัพเรือ—the Royal Thai Navy's Organizational Structure)," Royal Thai Navy (RTN), 19 September 2018, <https://www.navy.mi.th/>.

⁵⁸ JSL Global Media, "Marsun-Phu-Parit-Lea-Okbab-Ruea-Rob-Sunchat-Thai-100% I Patarawin Jongwiras: PERSPECTIVE [6 Dec B.E. 2563] (มาร์ซัน ผู้ผลิตและออกแบบ 'เรือรบ' สัญชาติไทย 100% | กัทรวิณ จงวิศาล : PERSPECTIVE [6 ธ.ค. 63]—Marsun 100% Thai Warship Building and Design Company I Patarawin Jongwiras: PERSPECTIVE [6 Dec 2020])," *YouTube*, 6 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/>; and *Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023* (Bangkok: RTN, 2023), 21, <https://drive.google.com/>.

⁵⁹ "Ngob-Praman-Pi-2567: Perd-Ngob-Pi-Rrak-Kong-Ratthaban-Settha-Hed-Dai-Tung-Tuk-Priab--Wa-Mai-Tang-Jak-Ratthaban-Prayutt (งบประมาณปี 2567 : เปิดฉบับแรกของรัฐบาล 'เศรษฐา' เหตุใดถึงถูกเปรียบว่าไม่ต่างจากรัฐบาล 'ประยุทธ์'—The Government Budget of 2024: Why the First Year Government Budget of Settha Administration Does Not Different from That of Prayutt Administration)," *BBC Thai*, 2 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/>; and "Pha-Ngob-Kalahom-2567-Chai-Arai-Thung-Dai-Ngob-Praman-1.98-San--Larn (ผ่านงบกลาโหม 2567 ไขอะไรถึงได้งบประมาณ 1.98 แสนล้าน—Scrutinizing the Defence Budget 2024: Why It Is 198 Billion [Baht])," *Thansettakij*, 23 March 2023, <https://www.thansettakij.com/>.

⁶⁰ Sangkaew interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Wattanayagorn interview.

operational level, below the rank of captain, further inhibiting its operational effectiveness and autonomy.⁶¹

Lastly, the RTN encounters challenges in garnering political support for allocating budget toward acquiring new naval technologies aimed at bolstering the fleet's blue water capabilities. This is evident in the public opposition faced by the RTN when it sought to purchase submarines from China.⁶² Despite the strategic importance of enhancing Thailand's naval capabilities, political reluctance to allocate funds for such acquisitions hampers the RTN's efforts to modernize and strengthen its fleet. This lack of political support undermines the RTN's ability to effectively project power and safeguard Thailand's maritime interests in the region.

SWOT Analysis Application

Utilizing SWOT analysis to assess Thailand's position amidst the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific revealed a comprehensive overview. Thailand exhibits eight strengths (S), along with eight weaknesses (W), while also presenting three opportunities (O) and one threat (T) in relation to the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific, as delineated in table 1.

⁶¹ Wattanayagorn interview; and Sangkaew interview.

⁶² Tita Sanglee, "Thai Navy's Submarine Acquisition Stuck in Limbo," *The Diplomat*, 23 July 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>; "Ruea-Damnam-Jeen-Ja-Dai-Pai-Tor-Rue-Mai ? ('เรือดำน้ำจีน' จะได้ไปต่อหรือไม่?—Any Chance for Continuity of 'the Chinese Submarines' Procurement ?)," *Matichon Weekly*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.matichonweekly.com/>; "Rum-Tan-Sue-Ruea-Damnam-Term-Fai-Kan-Mueang (รุมต้าน ซื้อ 'เรือดำน้ำ' เดิม ไฟการเมือง—Opposing Submarine Purchase, Politics in Fire)," *Bangkokbiznews*, 23 August 2020, <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/>; "Timeline-Mahakap-Ruea-Damnam-Saner-Plean-Pen-Ruea-Frigate-Jak-Jeen (ไทม์ไลน์มหากาพย์ 'เรือดำน้ำ' เสนอเปลี่ยนเป็น 'เรือฟริเกต' จากจีน—Timeline of Prolonged 'Submarine' Procurement: Purposing to Shift to Purchase Frigate from China)," *Thairath*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.thairath.co.th/>; and "Ngob-Praman-Pi-2567."

Table 1. SWOT analysis of Thailand’s maritime and naval conditions for securing itself amid maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific with detail

SWOT		Related Details	Sources
Strengths (S)	S1: Geopolitical advantage	Thailand occupies a strategically significant position within a vital sea lane connecting the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.	ONSC 2023, 13; ONSC n.d., 9
	S2: Balance of power strategic culture driven by colonialism legacies	Thailand has consistently pursued a delicate balancing act, engaging with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. This strategic approach, rooted in the concept of maintaining a balance of power, has been instrumental in safeguarding Thailand's autonomy since the colonial era.	Ibid, 9; Raymond 2018, 34 & 60-1; Blaxland and Raymond 2017, 15
	S3: No conflict of interest with any great powers	Thailand maintains a position without any conflicts of interest with major powers, unlike its neighboring nation Malaysia, which, possessing a similar geopolitical advantage, has become embroiled in conflicts with China in the South China Sea.	Till and Tsjeng 2018, 79; ONSC n.d., 9
	S4: Concurrently focusing on non-traditional maritime risks	This issue can serve as a basis for cooperation with both the United States and China, as they also prioritize its resolution.	Ibid, 9; ONSC 2023, 124
	S5: Sufficient know-how for producing high-quality Small and Medium Patrol and Coastal Defence Vessels	These are evidently strengths in their own right.	RTN n.d., 21; Sanglee 2021; Matchon Weekly 2022; VoiceOnline 2024; Peacharanond 2024
	S6: Governmental support in naval activities and procurements		
	S7: International potential compared to RTA and RTAF	The Royal Thai Navy (RTN) possesses greater opportunities for involvement in joint international operations compared to the Royal Thai Army (RTA) and Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF)	Wattanayagorn 2022
	S8: ASEAN membership	The ASEAN-led mechanism and its diplomatic framework can serve as a cooperative strategic balancing tool against the influence of major powers in the maritime domain.	ASEAN n.d.

SWOT		Related Details	Sources
Weaknesses (W)	W1: Geopolitical disadvantage	Given Thailand's extensive coastline, it is susceptible to the effects of maritime rivalry among major powers.	ONSC n.d., 9
	W2: Collective security rejection strategic culture driven by colonialism legacies	Thailand's strategic culture appears to strongly oppose collective security institutions, influenced by its history of colonization. Asian nations often interpret the concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention restrictively, viewing them as normatively delegitimizing. This perspective limits the range of options available for recommended small navy strategies.	Acharya 2005, 46-9
	W3: Administrative problems	Inadequate naval administration in the Andaman Sea and the absence of integrated entities not only render Thailand's coastline along the Indian Ocean vulnerable but also impede the RTN from fully leveraging its capabilities to safeguard Thailand's national interests at sea amid ongoing maritime rivalries.	Wattanayagorn 2022; MECC 2022; Pongsapipatt 2023
	W4: Insufficient capabilities and flexibilities in autonomous force projection beyond the EEZ	This situation could result in heightened interdependence with other nations, particularly the great powers.	Previously discussed and cited in the section "Thailand as a State Possessing Small Navy"
	W5: Insufficient know-how to produce any blue water vessels	This could result in heightened interdependence with other nations, particularly the great powers.	Previously discussed and cited in the section "Thailand as a State Possessing Small Navy"
	W6: Small shipbuilding market	This limits Thailand's choices of warship procurement.	Wattanayagorn 2022
	W7: Limited budget due to bureaucratic politics	These are evidently weaknesses in their own right.	Ibid; Bangkokbiznews 2020; Pecharanond 2024
	W8: Lack of public support as negatively perceived		
Opportunities (O)	O1: Joint naval drills, operations, and development and training programmes provided by particular great powers and amity nations	These actions not only empower Thailand to enhance its maritime and naval ties with the great powers but also simultaneously facilitate the absorption of naval best practices and technological expertise from these influential nations.	Previously discussed and cited in small navy strategies subsection

Table 1. (continued)

SWOT		Related Details	Sources
Opportunities (O)	O2: Multinational naval parades held by particular great powers and amity nations	This presents an opportunity for Thailand to bolster its relationships with major powers while simultaneously enhancing its international standing.	Previously discussed and cited in small navy strategies subsection
	O3: Other maritime and naval cooperation and related MoU with particular great powers and amity nations	This not only enables Thailand to enhance its maritime and naval relationships with major powers but also improves its naval force effectiveness.	
Threats (T)	T1: Consequences of tension escalation from the maritime rivalry among the great powers (T1A: the probability of involving in the great power's conflicts and T1B: unsecured valuable interests on the sea)	The escalated tension increases the likelihood of Thailand becoming involved in conflicts with major powers (T1A). Furthermore, given that Thailand's maritime economic value is approximately assessed at 24 trillion Thai baht per year and the majority of its fossil fuel supply comes through the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific, escalating tension obstructs the use of these vital sea lanes, thereby jeopardizing Thailand's economic and energy security (T1B).	Ibid; ONSC n.d., 1-2; ONSC 2023, 13; RTN n.d., 2

Recommended Small Navy Strategies for Thailand

Having analyzed Thailand's maritime and naval conditions within the context of maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific using SWOT analysis, the TOWS Matrix framework will be applied to identify recommended small navy strategies. Through this analysis, it is evident that leveraging strengths (S) to exploit opportunities (O) presents four viable strategies (SO) for Thailand. Additionally, by addressing weaknesses (W) to capitalize on opportunities (O), four strategies (WO) can mitigate deficiencies. Furthermore, utilizing strengths (S) to counter threats (T) yields two strategies (ST), while minimizing weaknesses (W) to avoid threats (T) suggests one strategy (WT), as outlined in table 2.

Table 2. TOWS matrix of Thailand's maritime and naval conditions for choosing recommended small navies strategies

TOWS Matrix		Details of the Matrix	Recommended Small Navies Strategies
Strengths-Opportunities Strategies (SO Strategies)	SO1	As a nation with a strategic culture of balancing power (S2), possessing the potential for an international navy (S7), and lacking conflicts of interest with major powers (S4), Thailand and the RTN can actively engage in joint naval drills, operations, development, and training programs offered by the United States, China, Russia, and friendly nations (O1).	<i>international maritime and naval cooperation for operational, diplomatic and development purposes</i>
	SO2	As a nation with a strategic culture of balancing power (S2), possessing the potential for an international navy (S7), and lacking conflicts of interest with major powers (S4), the RTN can deploy its fleet to participate in international naval parades organized by major powers and their allies (O2). This participation serves to strengthen maritime and naval relationships while enhancing Thailand's international standing.	<i>international maritime and naval cooperation for diplomatic purposes</i>
	SO3	Given the Thai government's support for naval procurements and activities (S6), the RTN has the opportunity to ratify maritime and naval memoranda of understanding (MoU) with major powers or friendly nations (O3). This facilitates the acquisition of advanced naval technologies from these partners.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of internationally technological procurement</i>
	SO4	Given that the RTN and Thailand's shipbuilding industries possess sufficient know-how for producing high-quality patrol and coastal defense vessels (S5), this capability can be leveraged to exploit opportunities for maritime and naval cooperation with major powers and friendly nations (O3). This may involve enhancing defense industrial relationships with allies that lack expertise in this area through vessel trading MoUs.	<i>international maritime and naval cooperation for diplomatic purposes</i>
Weaknesses--Opportunities Strategies (WO Strategies)	WO1	To effectively participate in joint naval drills and operations with major powers and their allies (O1), it is imperative to address the weaknesses of insufficient capabilities and flexibility in autonomous force projection beyond the EEZ (W4) and a lack of expertise in producing blue water vessels (W5). This can be achieved by procuring blue water vessels and related technologies from foreign nations in the short term, while simultaneously engaging in joint naval technology development with other states, enhancing naval staff knowledge and skills, and developing blue water infrastructure for long-term outcomes.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of international technological procurement, human resources, and infrastructure development</i>

Table 2. (continued)

TOWS Matrix		Details of the Matrix	Recommended Small Navies Strategies
Weaknesses-- Opportunities Strategies (WO Strategies)	WO2	Effectively enhancing defense industrial cooperation with major power allies through selling high-quality patrol and coastal defense vessels (O3) requires a robust naval industry. However, this is hindered by the limited size of the shipbuilding market (W6). Therefore, it is necessary to address this by supporting the domestic development of naval technologies and related infrastructure.	<i>naval force multiplier through domestic technologies and infrastructure development</i>
	WO3	Since participating in joint naval operations, drills, development, and training programs (O1), including involvement in naval parades held by major powers (O2) and signing MoUs on purchasing advanced naval technologies from other states (O3), requires a significant budget, the Thai government's allocation of a minor defense budget to the RTN while allocating the majority to the RTA (W3) presents a challenge. This results in the RTN facing the issue of insufficient budget, thereby hindering its ability to fully capitalize on these opportunities. Therefore, the RTN should address this by strategically persuading the government to allocate more budget to naval operations and modernization efforts.	<i>naval strategic communication</i>
	WO4	Given the negative public perception of the RTN and strong opposition to naval procurement (W8), the RTN's efforts to sign MoUs for purchasing naval technologies from foreign nations, such as submarines (O3), face significant obstacles. Consequently, it becomes imperative to address this weakness in order to fully leverage the associated opportunities. This can be achieved by strategically engaging with the public to garner their support and alleviate concerns regarding naval procurement initiatives.	<i>naval strategic communication</i>
Strengths-Threat Strategies (ST Strategies)	ST1	To mitigate the potential repercussions of tension escalation stemming from maritime rivalry among the great powers (T1), including the risk of involvement in conflicts (T1A) and the threat to unsecured maritime interests (T1B), Thailand can leverage its unique geopolitical position and strategic attributes. Benefiting from its lack of conflicts of interest with any great powers (S3), Thailand can capitalize on its balance of power strategic culture (S2) and its membership in ASEAN (S8). By diversifying its maritime and naval relationships with all great powers, while simultaneously strengthening ties with neighboring and amity nations possessing small navies, Thailand can effectively navigate the complexities of maritime rivalry and safeguard its national interests.	<i>maritime and naval hedging strategy</i>

TOWS Matrix		Details of the Matrix	Recommended Small Navies Strategies
Strengths-Threat Strategies (ST Strategies)	ST2	To address the challenge of unsecured maritime interests (T1B), the RTN can leverage government support for naval activities and procurements (S5). By utilizing this support, the RTN can strategically invest in acquiring blue-water warships or advanced naval technologies essential for safeguarding Thai commercial vessels across the air, surface, and underwater domains within the ambiguous maritime zones. This proactive approach ensures that Thailand's maritime interests are adequately protected amid evolving geopolitical dynamics.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of internationally technological procurement</i>
Weaknesses-Threat Strategies (WT Strategies)	WT1	To mitigate the risk of unsecured maritime interests (T1B), the RTN should address geopolitical disadvantages (W1), administrative challenges (W3), and budget constraints (W7) by implementing strategic reforms. This includes adapting the naval force structure to align with emerging maritime threats, enhancing administrative efficiency through digitalization, and prioritizing naval expenditure. These measures aim to optimize maritime and naval administration, ensuring Thailand's maritime interests are safeguarded effectively amid evolving geopolitical complexities.	<i>naval force multiplier in form of administrative reform</i>

Upon analysis using the TOWS matrix, it becomes evident that Thailand can enhance its maritime security amid great-power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific by pursuing a range of strategic initiatives. These include:

1. International Maritime and Naval Cooperation: Engaging in collaborative efforts with other naval forces and maritime nations to facilitate operations, strengthen regional security, foster diplomatic relations, and commonly develop naval capabilities.
2. Naval Force Multiplier Initiatives through Technology Acquisition: Implementing strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the RTN through international procurement, joint development programs, and domestic capacity-building efforts.
3. Naval Force Multiplier through Infrastructure Development: Investing in maritime infrastructure to improve naval capabilities and facilitate efficient operations in strategic maritime areas.

4. Naval Force Multiplier through Human Resources Development: Prioritizing training and skill development for naval personnel to ensure a proficient and capable maritime force.
5. Naval Force Multiplier through Administrative Reform: Streamlining administrative processes within the RTN to improve efficiency, coordination, and decision-making capabilities amid limited resources.
6. Maritime and Naval Hedging Strategies: Adopting flexible and adaptive strategies to navigate geopolitical uncertainties and mitigate risks associated with great-power competition.
7. Naval Strategic Communication: Enhancing communication efforts to convey Thailand's maritime interests, policies, and intentions effectively to the government, related domestic stakeholders, and the general public for legitimizing naval activities and procurement.

While these strategies offer significant benefits for Thailand's maritime security, it's essential to note that the TOWS matrix does not recommend certain approaches. These include:

1. International Maritime and Naval Institutional Building: Avoiding extensive commitments to formal institutional frameworks, which may limit flexibility and autonomy in decision making and be obstructed by strategic culture as previously mentioned.
2. Naval Force Multiplier Strategies Involving Seeking Naval Technologies through International Donations: Relying solely on external sources for naval technology may compromise self-reliance and long-term sustainability.
3. Naval Force Multiplier Strategies Involving Recruiting Naval Staff Aboard: Due to the trust issues.
4. Naval Force Multiplier Strategies Involving Fleet Structure Reform to Achieve National Maritime Goals: Pursuing large-scale restructuring of the naval fleet may pose logistical and operational challenges without clear strategic objectives and sufficient resources.

By focusing on the recommended strategies while being mindful of the limitations outlined by the TOWS matrix, Thailand can effectively navigate the complex maritime environment and safeguard its national interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

Comparing to Contemporary Strategies and Plans

This article has already examined seven contemporary strategies and plans regarding Thailand's maritime security and naval affairs: the National Maritime Security Plan 2015–2021, Royal Thai Navy Strategy 2015–2024, Royal Thai Navy Strategy 2017–2036, “Security Strategy” in National Strategy 2018–2037 (Brief Version), Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023, National Maritime Security Plan 2023–2027, and Operational Plan for Developing National Security Capability 2023–2027. It is evident that these strategies and plans collectively aim to achieve the recommended small navy strategies for Thailand to secure itself amid maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific.⁶³

In terms of maritime and naval international cooperation, the strategies and plans indicate that the RTN is responsive to missions related to relations and activities with other navies. Maritime security frameworks, both bilateral and multilateral, are designated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). To enhance operational capabilities, Thailand plans to conduct joint naval operations with navies of neighboring countries, amity countries, and the great powers, engage in joint patrols and intelligence exchange with other navies, continuously participate in naval and maritime activities in the region, and establish agreements on supporting military supply in both peacetime and wartime.

Moreover, Thailand aims to maintain, build, and strengthen alliances and maritime security cooperation with navies of neighboring countries, amity countries, and the great powers. This will be pursued through bilateral and multilateral engagements, with Thailand playing a leading role in peacetime to effectively improve diplomatic relations in naval and maritime affairs. However, the RTN must establish a clear framework for its foreign affairs to ensure it receives sufficient interest.

Finally, joint naval drills, exchange of best practices, and sharing of experiences with other navies are planned to be achieved for force development purposes.

In terms of naval force multiplier, the RTN intends to acquire modern and advanced technologies to enable naval operations far from shore and enhance

⁶³ ONSC, “Phaen-Kuam-Munkong-HangChat-Tang-Talay B.E. 2558-2564”; “Yuttasat-Kongthap-Ruea B.E. 2558-2567”; “Yuttasat-Kongthap-Ruea B.E. 2560-2579 (ยุทธศาสตร์กองทัพเรือ ๒๕๖๐-๒๕๗๙—Royal Thai Naval Strategy 2017-2036),” Royal Thai Navy (RTN), n.d., <https://www.navy.mi.th/>; “Yutthasat-Chat B.E. 2561-2580 (Chabab-Yor)(ยุทธศาสตร์ชาติ พ.ศ.2561 – 2580 (ฉบับย่อ)—National Strategy 2018-2037 (Brief Version))” (Bangkok: National Strategy Council Secretariat and Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, n.d.), <https://www.nesdc.go.th/>; *Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023*; “Phaen-Kuam-Munkong-HangChat-Tang-Talay B.E. 2566-2570”; *Paen-Patbatkan-Dan-Kan-Pattana-Sakayapab-Kong-Prates-Dan-Kuam-Mankong B.E. 2566-2570* (แผนปฏิบัติการด้านการพัฒนาศักยภาพของประเทศด้านความมั่นคง (พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๖ - ๒๕๗๐)—*Operational Plan for Developing National Security Capability 2023-2027* (Bangkok: MOD, n.d.), <https://opsd.mod.go.th/>.

coastal defense and air defense systems. This includes procuring four advanced frigates, two of which will be equipped with cruise missiles for commission in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea, as well as technologies for naval aviation capabilities, especially maritime patrol aircrafts (MPA), submarine warfare capabilities, and netcentric warfare capabilities. These procurements are prioritized as the first, third, fourth, and fifth priorities of the RTN spending, although the source of procurement is not explicitly indicated. Given the current capabilities of Thailand's shipbuilding industry, it is implied that the RTN plans to procure these technologies from other countries. Concurrently, the RTN aims to support domestic development in certain naval technologies through research and development (R&D) programs, particularly focusing on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), unmanned surface vehicles (USV), and the prototype of midget submarines, which is the sixth priority of RTN spending.

Furthermore, the RTN plans to support the domestic shipbuilding industry, particularly in producing Small and Medium Patrol Vessels and conducting R&D on mines. In addition to technological advancements, the RTN also aims to improve naval infrastructure by developing naval bases and facilities in the Andaman Sea and its coast, with a focus on forward bases and submarine bases, which constitute the second priority of RTN spending. Development plans also extend to forward bases and submarine bases in the Gulf of Thailand and its coast.

In addition to tangible measures, the strategies and plans emphasize human resource development in entities related to maritime and naval affairs. This includes conducting naval drills such as naval exercises for revision, integrative naval drills with other military branches, and joint naval drills with other navies. Moreover, there is a focus on enhancing maritime and naval specializations of naval officers and related staff, particularly in leveraging digital, cyber, and space technology for national security, maritime law and obligations, military strategy and crisis planning, intelligence analysis, military functions other than war, and English proficiency. Best practice exchange across governmental entities and knowledge absorption from overseas are also highlighted, along with the need to adapt to dynamically changing technology requirements.

Administrative reform within maritime and naval entities is also planned, with an emphasis on integrative and flexible administration to address maritime security issues. This includes digitalizing administrative systems and establishing databases on security issues such as one marine chart and maritime spatial planning. Adjusting the naval force in accordance with threats and domestic contexts is also prioritized.

The strategies and plans implicitly address a maritime and naval hedging strategy, as the RTN and other maritime security entities of Thailand position themselves

on the international stage. This is evidenced by the planned bilateral and multilateral joint naval operations and drills with navies of neighboring countries, amity countries, and the great powers.

Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the pursuit of naval strategic communication, which involves leveraging informational technologies and public relations to garner support from the public and stakeholders for RTN activities and budget distribution. Additionally, there is a focus on developing a system for information operations.

Contemporary Practices

Overall, Thailand has endeavored to pursue all recommended small navy strategies outlined in the strategies and plans, although the success of these attempts has been partial. Thailand's pursuit of maritime and naval international cooperation with willing nations has been hampered by budget constraints, leading to a reactive rather than proactive approach.⁶⁴

Operationally, the RTN has engaged in joint patrols with other navies, such as Thai-Vietnam joint naval patrols and patrols in the Malacca Strait with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Additionally, intelligence exchanges, exemplified by the MoU on White Ship Information Exchange with the Indian Navy, have been conducted.⁶⁵ However, participation in antipiracy campaigns, such as CTF-151, has been limited due to a lack of requests.⁶⁶

Diplomatically, the RTN has facilitated foreign naval officers' education in Thai institutions to strengthen ties between Thai and foreign naval staff. Notably, naval staff from various countries have been allowed to study in nonconfidential classes at the Naval Command and Staff College. Furthermore, logistic cooperation agreements with at least 13 navies have been established to support agreed-upon military supply during port visits.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the RTN sends liaison officers to various entities such as The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) operated by the Singaporean Navy, the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region

⁶⁴ Jitprawat interview; and Thai diplomat, interview by the author, 13 December 2023.

⁶⁵ Sangkaew interview; and Jitprawat interview.

⁶⁶ Jitprawat interview.

⁶⁷ Sangkaew interview.

(IFCIOR) operated by the Indian Navy, and the Combined Maritime Force (CMF), particularly CTF-151.⁶⁸

In addition, the RTN and the MFA have participated in international conferences and diplomatic frameworks related to maritime and naval security. Notable events include the West-Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium which Thailand was a host on December 2023, International Seapower Symposium, Intersessional Session in Maritime Security of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Expert Working Group on Maritime Security of ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) with the US which Thailand, under the US funding, was a host for the PSI workshop in 2023, and Thai-Vietnam Joint Committee on Security.⁶⁹ Additionally, the RTN participates port visits and naval parades in countries such as Cambodia, Russia, China, Australia, the Philippines, and India.⁷⁰ Notably, Thailand hosted the naval parade and ASEAN Navy Commanders Conference in Pattaya in 2018.⁷¹

Regarding force development, the RTN sends its naval staff for training and education abroad, with naval cadets studying in prestigious institutions such as the naval academics in Germany, the United States, Spain, Japan, Australia, Italy, China, and Russia. Naval staff also attend courses at institutions like the Naval Command and Staff College in various countries, including the US, Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, China, Japan, India, South Korea, Russia, and Germany, as well as the Naval War College in the US and China. Specialized training courses, such as Maritime Policy in Australia and Anti-submarine and UAVs in the US, are also provided.⁷² Additionally, the RTN actively participates in joint naval drills with various partners, including exercises such as RIMPAC (sent only officers), CARAT, COBRA Gold, and Guardian Sea with the United States, Blue Strike with China, PASSEX with Japan, Thalay Laut with Malaysia, and Sea Garuda with Indonesia as well as regional exercises like the ASEAN Multinational Naval Exercise (AM-

⁶⁸ Pongsapipatt interview; Thai diplomat interview; Royal Thai Navy (RTN), “Khao-San-Navee (ข่าวสารนาวิก - Navy News)” (Printing House Division, Naval Administration Department, November 2019), 3, <https://www.navy.mi.th/>; and Sangkaew interview.

⁶⁹ Sangkaew interview; Thai diplomat interview; and “Khao-San-Navee.”

⁷⁰ Jitprawat interview; and Pongsapipatt interview.

⁷¹ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁷² Sangkaew interview.

NEX), the ASEAN Maritime Exercise (AUMEX) and ASEAN - Russia Naval Exercise (ARNEX).⁷³

However, the RTN has faced challenges in pursuing maritime and naval institutional building. Despite attempts to establish ASEAN's navy, this initiative has not succeeded due to differences in naval protocols among ASEAN members and a lack of trust, exacerbated by maritime disputes, particularly concerning fisheries, between Thailand and other ASEAN members. These disputes have led ASEAN members to perceive each other as potential threats.⁷⁴

Moreover, the RTN has encountered obstacles in implementing its naval force multiplier strategy. One major setback has been the procurement of advanced naval technologies through international channels. A notable example is the prolonged procurement process for submarines. Although Thailand agreed to purchase the first S26T *Yuan*-class submarine from China in 2017, with payment scheduled over seven years, this decision faced criticism regarding its necessity and the quality of the vessel. The subsequent purchases of the second and third submarines were met with significant disapproval from the public and parliament due to fiscal constraints exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to their postponement in 2020.⁷⁵

The procurement of S26T *Yuan*-class submarines faced renewed criticism in 2022 when it was revealed that the first purchased submarine lacked an engine, as Germany's Motor and Turbine Union company refused to supply the cutting-edge MTU396 diesel engines to the Chinese firm building the submarines for the RTN.⁷⁶ This led to considerations regarding engine replacement by the Chinese company.⁷⁷ However, in October 2023, the new Defense Minister, Sutin Klangsang,

⁷³ Collin Koh, "ASEX-01N Strengthens the Intra-ASEAN Military Landscape," *East Asia Forum*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/>; Royal Thai Navy (RTN), "Thab-Ruea-Pak-Ti-Sam-Ruam--Fuk-Pasom-ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX - 21) (ทัพเรือภาคที่ ๓ ร่วมการฝึกผสม ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX - 21)-The Third Naval Division Participated in the Joint Naval Drill ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX - 21))," 3 December 2021, <https://www.navy.mi.th/>; Sangkaew interview; Pongsapipatt interview; Jitprawat interview; "Khao-San-Navee."

⁷⁴ Sangkaew interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Jitprawat interview.

⁷⁵ Sanglee, "Thai Navy's Submarine Acquisition Stuck in Limbo"; and Sebastian Strangio, "Thai-Chinese Submarine Deal Faces Axe: PM Prayut," *The Diplomat*, 7 April 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁷⁶ Strangio, "Thai-Chinese Submarine Deal Faces Axe"; and "Yuthapong-Share-Ruea-Damnam-Lum-Ti-Nueng-Rai-Kruangyon-Wissawakorn-Korsang-Pen-Kru-Sorn-Pasa (‘ยุทธพงศ์’ แจกเรือดำน้ำลำที่ 1 ไร้เครื่องยนต์-วิศวกรก่อสร้างทำจอดเป็นครูสอนภาษา—‘Yuthapong’ Unfolds the First Purchased Submarine Does Not Have Any Engine, and the Engineer of the Port Construction Is Just a Language Teacher)," *Daily News* (Thailand), 27 February 2022, <https://www.dailynews.co.th/>.

⁷⁷ "Timeline-Mahakap-Ruea-Damnam-Saner-Plean-Pen-Ruea-Frigate-Jak-Jeen."

proposed shifting from purchasing submarines to acquiring Chinese frigates instead. This proposal sparked a prolonged debate in the Thai Parliament and society.⁷⁸

Furthermore, the prolonged submarine procurement process has impeded the acquisition of four advanced frigates and maritime patrol aircraft (MPA). The procurement of a *Bhumibol*-class frigate was slated to be proposed in early 2024, pending resolution of the submarine procurement debate.⁷⁹ However, approval for the frigate procurement in the 2024 budget appears uncertain, with potential postponement to the 2025 budget due to fiscal constraints, prioritization of submarine procurement, and unclear terms of reference (TOR) for procurement.⁸⁰ Additionally, the budget allocation for MPA procurement remains pending despite being in the process.⁸¹

Acquiring planned naval technologies through domestic development has been partially successful. The RTN has managed to domestically develop underwater mines, and with support from the domestic ship industry, it can produce a variety of vessels, including hydrographic survey vessels, offshore patrol vessels (OPV), landing ship tanks, patrol crafts, harbor tugs, landing craft vehicle personnel, replenishment ships, and high-speed operation crafts.⁸² However, the RTN has encountered challenges in domestically developing UAVs and midget submarines for practical use as originally planned. These challenges stem from constraints in technology, budget limitations, and the need to establish comprehensive regulations governing military drone usage.⁸³

⁷⁸ “Timeline-Mahakap-Ruea-Damnam-Saner-Plean-Pen-Ruea-Frigate-Jak-Jeen”; “Sutin-Jang-Tad-Ngob-Kalahom-Pruad-Prad-Mai-Dai-Jud-Yuen-Kong-Derm-Mai-Kid-Su-Iea-Tahan (‘สทิน’ แจงจัดงบกลาโหมพรวดพราดไม่ได้ จุดยืนคงเดิม ไม่คิดชงเหี้ยมทหาร—Sutin Expressed Defence’s Budget Cannot Be Suddenly Reduced And Insisted His Previous Position on Does Not Appear to the Arm Force),” *VoiceOnline*, 4 January 2024, <https://www.voicetv.co.th/>.

⁷⁹ Peacharanond interview; Taweewuth Pongsapipatt (Retired Admiral and Former Deputy Supreme Commander), messages to the author, 25 January 2024; and Paron Sangkaew (Commander and Lecturer, Naval Education Department), messages to the author, 11 January 11, 2024.

⁸⁰ “‘Sutin’-Prob-’TorRor’-Took-Titok-’Ruea-Frigate’-17,000-Larn-Tae-Dai-’Ruea-Damnam’-Nae (‘สทิน’ปล่อย‘ทร.’ ถูกติดก’เรือฟริเกต’ 17,000 ล้าน แต่ได้‘เรือดำน้ำ’เน—‘Sutin’ Mollifies ‘the RTN’ as Seventeen Billion Baht Frigate Is Not Approved But Grants The Submarine),” *Naewna*, 8 March 2024, <https://www.naewna.com/>; “KorMorTor-Jang-Tad-Ngob-Ruea-Frigate-Chee-TorRor-Maimee-TOR-Chad-Sue-Jak-Prated-Nai-Wan-Sumroi-Rueadamnam (กมธ.แจงจัดงบเรือฟริเกต ชีทร. ไม่มีที่ใ้อารชัดซื้อจากปท. โหน หวันชำรอยเรือดำน้ำ—Comm. Informs Disapprove Frigate Procurement Budget as the RTN Does Not Have a Clear TOR with a Concern on the Repeats of the Submarine Procurement),” *KhaosodOnline*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.khaosod.co.th/>.

⁸¹ Sangkaew messages.

⁸² “Khao-San-Navee”; and *Royal Thai Navy White Paper 2023*.

⁸³ Wattanayagorn interview; Jitprawat interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Sangkaew interview.

The RTN currently does not possess naval technologies acquired through donations from other states, nor has it engaged in joint development programs for such technologies.⁸⁴ Instead, the RTN's approach favors purchasing vessel plans from other countries and constructing vessels based on those plans. For example, the OPV Krabi was built at Mahidol Dockyard Thailand using a plan purchased from the United Kingdom.⁸⁵

As for infrastructure development, progress is underway but has faced challenges. Efforts to enhance naval bases and facilities, including improving capabilities at existing bases and developing submarine infrastructure such as the submarine base at Sattahip, a submarine dockyard near Mahidol Dockyard, and a submarine stop at Ang Thong Archipelago, are ongoing. However, these initiatives have encountered difficulties due to constraints in both budgetary allocations and available land resources.⁸⁶

Human resource development is a key focus for the RTN, with efforts showing effectiveness through various initiatives. Naval staff have been sent abroad for studies and training, as well as participating in joint naval drills with other navies, as previously mentioned. The RTN also conducts regular revisional naval drills and integrative exercises with other branches of the Royal Thai Armed Forces.⁸⁷ Additionally, the Maritime Enforcement Command Center (MECC) facilitates joint drills between naval and maritime entities in Thailand, including foreign participants.⁸⁸

In terms of administrative reform, progress has been made but remains partial. The establishment of the MECC as an integrative administration entity for maritime law enforcement in March 2019 was a significant step, although it currently relies on the RTN's force and lacks its own dedicated force.⁸⁹ Efforts to transition to a digital navy have encountered challenges, with the existing administrative system favoring analog document management. Technological constraints have hindered the practical use of an electronic document management system.⁹⁰

Adjusting the force in response to threats and domestic context is a gradual process.⁹¹ Minister of Defense Sutin Klangsang outlined plans for force adjustment

⁸⁴ Sangkaew interview; and Wattanayagorn interview.

⁸⁵ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁸⁶ Pongsapipatt interview; and Sangkaew interview.

⁸⁷ Sangkaew messages; and "Khao-San-Navee."

⁸⁸ Jitprawatt interview.

⁸⁹ MECC, "Parakij-Lea-Kongsang"; Wattanayagorn interview; Pongsapipatt interview; and Jitprawatt interview.

⁹⁰ Sangkaew interview.

⁹¹ Jitprawatt interview.

by 2027 during a National Assembly address on 4 January 2024. These plans include implementing an early retirement program, considering squadron dissolution and merger for a more compact force structure, and adjusting enlistment rates while enhancing incentives for military service.⁹²

On a positive note, the RTN successfully established the Cyber Security Operation Center in 2018 and launched its first White Paper in 2023.⁹³ The White Paper release marked a significant milestone, as it provided the public insight into the RTN's spending priorities, as mentioned earlier when discussing naval technologies and infrastructure.⁹⁴

Thailand effectively implements a maritime and naval hedging strategy, demonstrated by the RTN and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) engaging in joint naval patrols, drills, and diplomatic frameworks. This includes sending naval staff for training abroad and engaging in the purchase of naval technologies from neighboring countries, amity countries, and great powers, as previously outlined. Notably, the procurement of specific warships serves to diversify arms sources inherently, as it involves sourcing components from multiple countries. For instance, the debated S26T Submarine involves production by a Chinese company and engines initially sourced from Germany.⁹⁵ This strategy enables the RTN to mitigate excessive reliance on any single country for naval acquisitions.

Despite attempts by the RTN and Ministry of Defense (MOD) to engage in naval strategic communication, success has been limited due to implementation challenges.⁹⁶ The RTN's unfamiliarity with utilizing social media platforms, resulting in content on its YouTube channels diverging from societal trends, diminishes its impact.⁹⁷ Moreover, the RTN website predominantly promotes high-ranking naval staff over squadron missions, hindering public engagement.⁹⁸ Similarly, MOD communication methods are characterized by passivity, formality, and academic tone, further complicating effective communication.⁹⁹

⁹² “Sutin-Jang-Tad-Ngob-Kalahom-Pruad-Prad-Mai-Dai-Jud-Yuen-Kong-Derm-Mai-Kid-Su-Iea--Tahan.”

⁹³ Sangkaew interview; Jitprawat interview; Naval Secretariat, “Phubanchakan-Tahan-Ruea-Yeam-Soon-Cyber-Krom-Kan-Sue-San-Lae-Technology-Sarasontes-Tahan-Ruea (ผู้บัญชาการทหารเรือเยี่ยมชมศูนย์ไซเบอร์กรมการสื่อสารและเทคโนโลยีสารสนเทศทหารเรือ - A Commander in Chief of The Royal Thai Navy Visited Cyber Operation Centre, Naval Communications and Information Technology Department),” 14 September 2018, <https://www.sctr.navy.mi.th/>.

⁹⁴ Peacharanond interview.

⁹⁵ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁹⁶ Pongsapipatt interview.

⁹⁷ Sangkaew interview.

⁹⁸ Sangkaew interview.

⁹⁹ Peacharanond interview.

The absence of unified administrative bodies, coupled with a lack of dedicated presentation teams and political instability, further undermines naval strategic communication efforts.¹⁰⁰ These challenges not only contribute to public misunderstanding of maritime security and naval affairs but also impede trust-building initiatives.

Conclusion

This article has delved into how Thailand can employ small navy strategies to navigate the maritime rivalry among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific. It reveals that a *small navy* is one whose capabilities and flexibility allow for constabulary missions as the primary naval function, along with limited military and diplomatic operations beyond the EEZ due to various constraints such as fleet size, equipment quality, resource availability, and political constraints.

There are five key small navy strategies identified: international maritime and naval cooperation, international maritime and naval institutional building, naval force multiplier initiatives, maritime and naval hedging, and naval strategic communication. The historical context of maritime rivalry among great powers in the Indo-Pacific has posed enduring challenges to Thailand, shaping its policies and practices over time.

Presently, Thailand is recognized as possessing a small navy, with recommended strategies including international cooperation, technological acquisition, infrastructure development, human resource enhancement, administrative reform, hedging strategy, and strategic communication. Contemporary strategies and plans in maritime security and naval affairs aim to align with these recommendations, yet success remains partial.

Moving forward, the dynamic nature of maritime rivalry in the Indo-Pacific necessitates ongoing scrutiny of Thailand's ability to employ these small navy strategies effectively. Factors such as naval capabilities, shipbuilding industry capacity, government support, public opinion, and regional relationships will influence the adaptability and relevance of these strategies in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics. ✪

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¹⁰⁰ Peacharanond interview; interview; Wattanayagorn interview; and "Nyua-Nyan-Kongthap-Ruea."

From Mahan to Corbett

An Inquiry into the Development of Chinese Naval Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region

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This article examines how China draws upon the strategic theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Corbett to shape its emerging naval doctrine and force posture in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). It traces Mahan's emphasis on sea power and naval supremacy, as well as Corbett's concepts of maritime communications and balancing maritime forces with terrestrial capabilities. The article analyzes China's accelerated naval modernization, including its aircraft carrier program, and its increasing military presence across key maritime chokepoints and archipelagic chains stretching into the IOR through port access facilities and security partnerships. It argues that Beijing synthesizes a hybrid maritime strategy that combines Mahanian principles of decisive naval dominance with Corbettian advocacy for controlling sea lines of communication to protect economic interests. While facing limitations in achieving complete control, China appears poised to acquire significant deterrent capabilities countering US regional primacy. This analysis sheds light on China's multifaceted theoretical framework motivating its drive for greater power projection into the Indian Ocean.

For decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) projected Deng Xiaoping's famous slogan "China's peaceful rise" as the ultimate mantra in its international diplomacy, which beguiled many international relations (IR) pundits. However, recent robust expansionist policies displayed by Beijing have rebutted claims emerging from Western IR scholars and ended the Chinese myth of "peaceful rise" for good. It is evident that China's present ambitions are well shielded by the naval strategy of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), whose long-term strategic mechanism has a broad outlook toward naval expansion. China recognizes the importance of naval supremacy as an indispensable factor in countering the dwindling American presence in the Indian Ocean. Against this backdrop, one must endeavor to understand China's naval strategy in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean holds significance beyond being a mere body of water, as its civilizational legacy reflects both Indian, Chinese, and many more footprints in history. Given its perennial value as a decisive factor, the Indian Ocean is on the verge of transforming into a game-changer. The Rimland theory, propounded by

John Spykman as a supportive theory to Halford John Mackinder’s “Heartland concept,” underscores the significance of the Indian Ocean for the twenty-first century.¹

This article’s task is threefold. First, it establishes Alfred Tyler Mahan’s analogy of sea power as a modern Chinese strategic perception in bolstering its economic prosperity. By highlighting the enormous military capacity earned by the PLAN as an organized force, this article discusses the aircraft carrier program aimed at challenging US naval hegemony in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean. The recent launch of China’s first domestically designed aircraft carrier, *Fujian*, in September 2023 marks a significant milestone in China’s pursuit of projecting its strength beyond its shores. Capable of carrying a complete fleet of aircraft, *Fujian*’s technological capacity rivals that of the USS *Gerald Ford*, the most advanced carrier in the US Navy’s service.² While China currently trails the United States in terms of the number of aircraft carriers, with only four compared to the US Navy’s larger fleet, Beijing is actively working to acquire at least another five to six aircraft carriers by the 2030s. This endeavor aims to elevate PLAN’s status into a world-class navy capable of challenging the omnipotent naval supremacy of the United States.

Secondly, this article extends its focus to the Indian Ocean while discussing the steady development of PLAN. Drawing from the theoretical impetus derived from both Mahan and British strategist Julian Corbett, this article examines China’s potential for developing its Indian Ocean fleet and other geopolitical strategies Beijing aspires to utilize.

The third focus of this work lies in examining the deeper roots of Chinese naval strategy in the Indian Ocean, which align with China’s economic ambitions as the emerging center of the world’s production and its related challenge of oil imports from the Middle East and Africa. The overarching result of this article will demonstrate the gravity of geopolitical entanglement in the Indian Ocean as a pond for all the great powers. Additionally, the analysis in this study assesses Chinese strategic thinking influenced by both Mahan and Corbett.

Influence of Mahan and Corbett on Chinese Naval Strategy

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) and Julian Corbett (1854–1922) emerge as two distinct strategists in naval warfare. Despite the contrasting nature of their

¹ John Spykman, *Geography of the Peace* (Hamden, CT: Archeon Books, 1944).

² Jon Happer, “Eagle vs Dragon: How the U.S. and Chinese Navies Stack Up,” *National Defense* 104, no. 796 (2020), 26 <https://www.jstor.org/>.

strategies, the contributions made by both are undeniably exceptional. Mahan, a naval historian, viewed anarchy as a defining feature of IR due to the lack of stringent mechanisms to safeguard world order amid chaos. He advocated for robust armament as a deterrent against potential conflicts.³ Additionally, Mahan emphasized the importance of a hierarchy in which great powers, particularly commercial states, played a pivotal role due to the wealth generated from international trade. His depiction of Great Britain, or “*Pax Britannica*,” in the nineteenth century underscored British political supremacy based on its unchallengeable position as a trading state and naval hegemony at sea.⁴ Mahan’s strategic thinking centered on the nexus between a country’s foreign policy and naval power, highlighting the necessity of acquiring formidable warships and fleets for any aspiring great power seeking expansion.⁵

In contrast, Julian Corbett, a British naval historian, diverged from Mahan’s seminal work with his exhaustive efforts. His major contribution to naval strategic thinking lies in his work “Principles of Maritime Strategy,” which provides astute analysis on the objective nature of naval warfare rather than solely focusing on naval hegemony. Corbett argued that the objective of naval warfare should be to secure command of the sea or prevent the enemy from doing so. Unlike Mahan, who emphasized achieving complete triumph over the enemy through major sea battles, Corbett advocated for the development of distinctive strategies tailored to great powers, including the creation of effective maritime strategies.⁶

Corbett’s perspective equated command of the sea with control of maritime communications, whether for commercial or military purposes. Drawing from Carl von Clausewitz, Corbett integrated maritime strategy as a mechanism to support or obstruct diplomatic efforts.⁷ He acknowledged the limitations of sea power, particularly in the face of continental powers, and advocated for a proper balance between sea power and land power to confront formidable foes. Corbett’s analysis, rooted in Great Britain’s experience in the nineteenth century, blended the concepts of sea power and maritime communication to secure its position amid the Napoleonic Wars.

In short, while Mahan extolled the importance of achieving dominance at sea through formidable fleets, Corbett’s maritime strategy revered the notion of at-

³ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1987).

⁴ Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power*, 189.

⁵ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Mahan on Naval Warfare* (London: Dover Publications, 1906).

⁶ Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Portsmouth: Naval Institute Press, 1911).

⁷ Julian S. Corbett, *The Spectre of Navalism* (London: Darling & Son, 1915).

taining maritime communication without necessarily engaging in sea battles. Corbett emphasized the constant pressure exerted by a navy's presence, which he termed "Fleet in Being," as a means of strategic influence⁸

The motivations driving China to draw upon both Mahan and Corbett are deeply rooted in Beijing's ambitions to emerge as a superpower. When Mahan articulated the concept of sea power in the nineteenth century, the United States was in its early stages of engaging in global affairs. Mahan's renowned thesis on "Sea Power" served as an inspiration to the nascent US, emphasizing the imperative of securing maritime dominance before asserting significant influence on the world stage. This notion resonated strongly with US leaders like Theodore Roosevelt, who sought to elevate the nation's status to that of a global power. Similarly, Chinese strategic thinking has embraced Mahan's principles, recognizing the pivotal role of maritime power in achieving broader geopolitical objectives.

Leading scholars James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara offer a comprehensive analysis in their work "The Influence of Mahan upon Chinese Maritime Strategy," detailing China's efforts to adopt Mahanian principles.⁹ It is important to note that China's interest in sea power surged alongside its remarkable economic progress in the late twentieth century. While Mahan coined the phrase, he did not provide a precise definition of *sea power*. He viewed it as a multifaceted system encompassing various forms of maritime utilization with both civil and military applications. Mahan underscored the economic significance of the sea, particularly in trade, arguing that sea power could significantly enhance a nation's wealth and power. Historian Andrew Lambert posits that Mahan's use of *sea power* (two words) explored the strategic utilization of the sea, distinct from traditional notions of a state being a *seapower* (one word).¹⁰

In his acclaimed work titled "Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power," Robert Kaplan asserts that China has swiftly turned to Mahan in its strategic deliberations.¹¹ Historically, Chinese emulation of Japanese imperial warfare trends predates the World War II, as military advisors in the Qing dynasty sought insights from the Japanese navy's naval developments, despite their perceived insufficiencies. Following Deng Xiaoping's reforms, Chinese strategic thinking was captivated by Mahan's emphasis on achieving complete command of the sea, which

⁸ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 234.

⁹ James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "The Influence of Mahan upon China's Maritime Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 24, no. 1 (2005): 23–51, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁰ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/>.

¹¹ Robert Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

Chinese policy makers aptly linked with commercial prosperity. For instance, in 2004, a defense paper issued by General Jiang Shiliang underscored China's justification for controlling "strategic passages."¹²

It is worth noting that this subtle shift in strategic thinking occurred a decade before the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and at a time when Beijing's rhetoric regarding the South China Sea exhibited only slight signs of hostility.¹³ Chinese thinkers frequently applied Mahanian principles to bolster China's dominance, exemplified by Beijing's assertive stance toward Taiwan, situated at the midpoint of the first island chain. Indeed, China's perception of claiming Taiwan appears to have been influenced by Mahan, as Beijing views possession of Taiwan as granting direct access to the Pacific.

The current utilization of Mahan by the PLAN transcends mere rhetoric, as it entails significant implications for the reorganization of the Navy. The Mahanian spirit resonates strongly with many modern Chinese naval strategists, some of whom characterize China as an *oceanic nation*, naturally endowed with a long coastline. Admiral Liu Huaqing's initiation of the Chinese "offshore defense strategy" focused on asserting sea control for a finite duration, extending several hundred miles off the mainland coast.¹⁴

Chinese naval history boasts a rich heritage that predates European maritime ventures. The naval expeditions conducted by the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century were marked by awe and genuine interest in expanding Chinese culture.¹⁵ These endeavors were underpinned by the belief in upholding Chinese superiority over other nations, with the Chinese readily resorting to the use of force when their presence was challenged. For instance, the historic conflict between the Ming dynasty and the Kotte Kingdom in the fifteenth century,¹⁶ culminating in the

¹² Jiang Shiliang, "The Command of Communications," *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, 2 October 2002, 106–14, FBIS-CPP20030107000189.

¹³ "China's National Defense in 2004" (white paper, PRC State Council, 27 December 2004), <https://china.usc.edu/>.

¹⁴ Wu Shengli and Hu Yanlin, "Building a Powerful People's Navy That Meets the Requirements of the Historical Mission for Our Army," *Qiusbi* 14 (16 July 2007).

¹⁵ Bruce A. Elleman, *The Making of the Modern Chinese Navy: Special Historical Characteristics* (Ithaca, NY: Anthem Press, 2019).

¹⁶ The Kotte Kingdom was a prominent political entity in what is today Sri Lanka during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Established in the fourteenth century near present-day Colombo, it reached its height under Parakramabahu VI. The kingdom was known for its centralized administration, strategic trade location, and cultural patronage.

capture of the Kotte ruler as a prisoner, exemplified the Chinese concept of *tianxia* under the auspices of Ming rulers.¹⁷

However, China's once-dominant position as a naval power faded into obscurity following Emperor Hongxi's decision to dismantle the fleet, effectively marking the end of China's naval legacy. The emperor's choice to cease naval voyages may have stemmed from his Confucian worldview, which harbored hostility toward navigation and mercantile pursuits. Nonetheless, China's withdrawal from the Indian Ocean created an opening for European powers to embark on their formidable colonial ventures in the sixteenth century.¹⁸

China's renewed interest in developing a naval strategy centered on the Indian Ocean mirrors the rapid industrial progress witnessed in the late twentieth century, which underscored the critical need to expand sea routes as strategic conduits. The transformation of the PLAN from a coastal defense service under Mao Zedong to a fully-fledged navy in the late twentieth century was intimately linked to the challenges confronting the People's Republic of China since its inception. Initially, the Chinese naval doctrine merely mimicked the Soviet approach in the 1950s, focusing primarily on small-scale battles.¹⁹

Following the Sino-Soviet rift in the early 1960s, Chinese naval strategy entered a new phase when Admiral Xiao Jingguang presented a report to Mao advocating for the development of a robust naval mechanism for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Mao promptly endorsed the report, and on 24 January 1977, the PLAN submarine SS 252 embarked on a voyage spanning more than 3,300 nautical miles, successfully completing a training exercise in the Western Pacific.²⁰ This pivotal event reshaped the Chinese Navy's traditional coast guard image and laid the groundwork for distant-waters exercises thereafter.

The trajectory leading to the emergence of the PLAN's blue-water strategy was significantly influenced by Admiral Liu Huaqing's transformative initiatives upon assuming command of the PLAN in 1982. In a concept paper submitted to the Central Committee of the CCP, Liu argued that the development of capitalism was intricately linked to three factors: prosperity in navigation, the opening of new sea routes, and the discovery of new continents. According to Liu, the centers of

¹⁷ Punsara Amarasinghe, "Return of Admiral Zheng He's Policy to Current Chinese Maritime Ambitions in Indian Ocean: The Case of Sri Lanka," *The Geopolitics*, 4 March 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/>.

¹⁸ Lo Jung-pang, "The Decline of the Early Ming Navy," *Oriens Extramus* 5, no. 2 (1958), 149–68, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

¹⁹ Bruce A. Elleman, "China's New 'Imperial' Navy," *Naval War College Review* 55, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 143–54, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

²⁰ Rocoo M. Paone, "The New Chinese Navy," *American Intelligence Journal* 7, no. 3 (January 1986): 5–16, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

world civilizations shifted from the Orient to Western Europe, and subsequently to the United States.²¹

The evaluation of Mahan's strategy in shaping the development of the Chinese navy should be contextualized within the significant shifts that occurred in China following Deng Xiaoping's rise to power and subsequent changes in Chinese strategic thinking. From a broader perspective, Mahan delineated several factors as pivotal in the rise of maritime powers. These factors encompassed geographic position, physical configuration, territorial expanse, population size, and national character. China's alignment with these factors positioned it as a suitable candidate to emerge as a naval power, and the echoes of Mahan's principles continue to reverberate in the reshaping of China's naval strategy, with a particular emphasis on the Indian Ocean.

In 2004, at the Sea Lane Security Symposium, Chinese Admiral Wang Zaibang referenced Mahan's naval strategy as an inspirational guide for enhancing future Chinese naval power.²²

China's Tryst with the Indian Ocean

To address future challenges and effectively navigate the maritime domain, China is undertaking significant efforts to bolster its naval capabilities on a grand scale. A prominent aspect of China's maritime ambition is its fervent pursuit of expanding its aircraft carrier capacity, as evidenced by the unveiling of *Fujian*, China's first domestically designed aircraft carrier. The Indian Ocean holds paramount importance for China due to its critical role in facilitating oil imports. Chinese strategist Zeng Xinkai emphasizes China's vulnerability in its heavy reliance on other states to control its energy imports.²³

Moreover, China's expansive BRI underscores the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean for Beijing's policy makers. The roots of China's naval strategy consolidation in the Indian Ocean can be traced back to the era of Hu Jintao, who coined the famous term "Malacca Dilemma," highlighting China's concern over the vulnerability of its oil imports should a rival power blockade the narrow Strait of Malacca.²⁴

²¹ Eryan Ramadhani, "China in the Indian Ocean Region: The Confined 'Fat Seas Operations'," *India Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (June 2015), 146–59, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

²² Seth Cropsey and Arthur Milikh, "Mahan's Naval Strategy: China Learned It. Will America Forget It?," *World Affairs* 174, no. 6 (March–April 2012): 85–92, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

²³ Zeng Xinkai, "中国 "印度洋困境" 中的美国因素 (The American Factor in China's "Indian Ocean Dilemma)," *南亚研究 (South Asian Studies)* 2 (2012), <https://oversea.cnki.net/>.

²⁴ Junaid Ashraf, "String of Pearls and China's Emerging Strategic Culture," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 166–81, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

In response, China has increasingly focused on enhancing its presence in the Indian Ocean, shifting from a state of lethargy to active engagement. While there were no PLAN port visits in the Indian Ocean in 1999, this inertia evolved into a new phase by 2010, with the PLAN conducting annual visits to the region. The recent docking of PLAN's Hai Yang 24 Hao warship at the Colombo Port in Sri Lanka exemplifies China's consistent presence in the Indian Ocean, where smaller nations like Sri Lanka find themselves entangled as pawns. Furthermore, China's escalating naval presence in the Indian Ocean is underscored by its unique diplomatic outreach, as it stands as the only nation to establish embassies in all six nations bordering the Indian Ocean.²⁵

Drawing from the effective strategy of Mahan, China has stealthily developed its naval strategy in the Indian Ocean. Holmes asserts,

The PLA Navy must venture into South Asia to protect the shipping lanes and other Chinese geopolitical interests there. As the Chinese fleet establishes a presence in the Indian Ocean, however, it will find itself far from Chinese shores, in waters that lie mostly beyond the range of ASBMs [antiship ballistic missiles], diesel submarines, and fast patrol craft. Fortress-fleet logic avails Beijing little there. It only extends as far as anti-ship technology can take it.²⁶

Evidently, China continues to refine its naval strategy to safeguard economic interests by consolidating its naval strength from the Western Pacific to the Northern Indian Ocean, spanning from the Middle East and African coasts to the Malacca Strait. It appears that China has solidified its approach to the Indian Ocean by emulating the US strategy of the two-ocean fleet, which propelled the United States into global superpower status. As Holmes noted, the US two-ocean fleet was rooted in the legacy of Mahan, who advised Washington to base its naval strategy on a one-power standard. Mahan drew inspiration from the grandeur of the British Navy, analyzing its strength as the decisive factor behind British success against French and Spanish rivals.

Chinese strategist Hu Bo advocates for a two-ocean naval strategy, comprising both the Pacific and Indian Ocean fleets.²⁷ According to Hu, the proposed Indian Ocean Fleet should actively facilitate the safe passage of Chinese trade ships. Ad-

²⁵ Christopher Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?," *War on the Rocks*, 2 April 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

²⁶ James R. Holmes, "A 'Fortress Fleet' for China," *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 126, <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/>.

²⁷ Hu Bo, *Chinese Maritime Power in the 21st Century: Strategic Planning, Policy and Predictions*, trans. Zhang Yanpei, ed. Geoffrey Till (London: Routledge, 2020), 128.

ditionally, China's establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti is a crucial factor in assessing China's long-term ambitions in the Indian Ocean. The 300-meter-long berthing area capable of accommodating heavy vessels in Djibouti serves as a tangible indication of China's advancement in naval strategy in the Indian Ocean. Since its inception in 2017, the Djibouti facility has undergone significant construction, with some experts suggesting that the PLAN is constructing an underground electronic and cybersecurity facility there. Although China portrays the Djibouti base as a logistical or support facility, the underlying reality reflects Beijing's ambitious strategic intentions.

From a strategic standpoint, China has been meticulously devising various tactics to strengthen its ongoing naval presence in the Indian Ocean. The "String of Pearls" is a prominent strategy emblematic of Beijing's strategic objectives. This concept revolves around the notion that China strategically establishes ports in neighboring states to counterbalance India's influence. Additionally, China's naval developments under the guise of the BRI underscore the fervor of Chinese strategic interest surrounding the Indian subcontinent. The Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the aforementioned facility in Djibouti, and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka represent strategic locations that China proudly touts as ideal supply-and-support ports. Furthermore, the pretext of the BRI serves as another bastion that China can effectively utilize to counter strategic containment efforts by both the United States and India.

Sea Control and the Economic Ambitions

The military ambitions prevailing in the Indian Ocean align closely with Beijing's economic objectives, which prioritize achieving maximum economic prosperity and national rejuvenation by 2049. These aspirations were outlined at the CCP conference in 2012, with a sense of optimism surrounding Xi Jinping's envisioned "new era of prosperity."²⁸ China has made significant strides in its long-term strategic vision through the BRI, launched in 2013 as President Xi's initiative to revive China's historical Silk Road legacy.

However, the absence of a secure naval route to ensure the overall safety of Chinese ships traversing the region, attributed to China's Malacca dilemma, presents a significant challenge. Beijing's primary solution to this issue emphasizes the need to ensure safe passages for Chinese ships navigating through the Strait of Malacca. Alternatively, a more stringent option involves China's interest in

²⁸ Feng Zhang, "The Xi Jinping Doctrine of China's International Relations," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (July 2019): 7–24, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

exploring alternative sea routes to bypass the Strait of Malacca altogether. China's heightened focus on the Indian Ocean stems not only from its own naval route concerns but also from its recognition of the region's significance in energy transportation.

It may not be an overstatement to assert that if the Strait of Malacca represents China's Achilles heel, then the Indian Ocean strategy emerges as its last resort. To achieve this objective, China pursues the manipulative tactic of extending its steady influence among the fragile states in the Indian Ocean region, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These states grapple with endemic corruption, nepotism, and susceptibility to external threats in their postcolonial context. Notably, these countries are partner states of the BRI, and they have received substantial Chinese aid.

China's two-oceans policy, focusing on both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, assumes critical importance in Chinese maritime ambitions. While the Pacific presents a formidable challenge to Beijing due to the presence of the United States and its allies, the power vacuum and fragile security architecture in the Indian Ocean region offer an excellent opportunity for China to expand its presence. China further facilitates its interests by cultivating ties with internally destabilized states in South Asia.

The acquisition of the Hambantota port for a lease of 99 years and the Chinese-funded port city project in Colombo exemplify China's leveraging of its presence in India's backyard.²⁹ Presently, Sri Lanka owes China approximately USD 7 billion in commercial and bilateral debts, leading the island nation into a challenging financial condition, prompting Sri Lanka to declare default status in April 2022. However, China has recently agreed to restructure Sri Lanka's debt, enabling the island nation to secure the second tranche of USD 334 million from the International Monetary Fund.

Alongside Chinese influence in Sri Lanka, the potential repercussions can reshape geopolitical realities in the Indian Ocean. The increase in Chinese naval visits to ports like Colombo and Hambantota reflects Beijing's economic grip over Colombo, potentially shifting Sri Lanka away from India's orbit in addressing pertinent geopolitical issues. The power asymmetry between Colombo and Beijing became apparent in 2022 when a Chinese spy ship was permitted to dock in the Hambantota port despite India's objections. China declined Sri Lanka's foreign ministry request to defer the port visit, claiming it unjustified for certain countries to pres-

²⁹ Punsara Amarasinghe, "Thucydidean Reality in Sri Lanka," *New Zealand International Review* 48, no. 1 (2023): 10–11, <https://search.informit.org/>.

sure Colombo.³⁰ Subsequently, Sri Lanka announced that the ship would be allowed to dock, illustrating how Chinese tactics push small states to align with Beijing's strategic interests.

Overall, Beijing's approach toward weaker states in South Asia and Africa mirrors China's long-term strategic aspirations in the Indian Ocean, serving as a means for China to resolve its economic goals overseas.

Mahan vs Corbett: Hybrid Chinese Strategic Reading of the Indian Ocean

In addition to embracing Mahan as a key strategist in reshaping its naval strategy, China appears to be intrigued by the works of British naval historian Sir Julian Corbett. While Mahan and Corbett share certain commonalities, such as recognizing the need to control vital sea lanes for both strategic and commercial interests, Corbett diverges from Mahan's singular focus on achieving complete naval dominance over the enemy at sea. Specifically, Corbett rejects Mahan's emphasis on pursuing decisive battles to eliminate the enemy.

Contrary to the grand strategic outcome envisioned by Mahan through naval annihilation, Corbett argues for the importance of establishing temporary control of the sea through methods such as blockade, commerce raiding, or homeland defense. Andrew Latham states, "For Corbett, as for Clausewitz the most fundamental principle was the primacy of politics in war. Maritime strategy, he believed, should always be derived from nation's specific political goals, purposes and constrains."³¹

In Latham's analysis, China finds several compelling reasons to incorporate both Mahan and Corbett into shaping its naval strategy. Among the myriad factors driving China's maritime focus, a primary catalyst is its notable shift from defending the mainland to asserting claims over disputed territories, a strategy known as "offshore balancing." This strategy comprises three main principles.

Firstly, it entails the protection of China's land and littoral frontiers, which encompasses securing the entirety of the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, claiming certain islands in the East China Sea, and ultimately regaining control of Taiwan. Secondly, the principle of offshore balancing emphasizes extending China's influence to its immediate neighborhood, spanning from Vietnam to Thailand. Thirdly, and most crucially, China is determined to expand its chains of

³⁰ Mandeep Singh, "Chinese spy ships cause concern in India," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, 26 December 2022, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/>.

³¹ Andrew Latham, "Mahan, Corbett and China's Maritime Grand Strategy," *The Diplomat*, 24 August 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

island strategy across five chains, aiming to establish a balance of power that prevents US hegemony from prevailing.

The fourth and fifth island chains, encompassing states like Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan, and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, lean in favor of China's ascent as a key player in the Indian Ocean. These strategic moves underscore China's ambition to shape the maritime domain and assert its influence in regions vital to its national interests.

Corbett's insight emerges as instrumental in shaping China's naval strategy, influenced by Mahanian principles. Corbett's philosophy fundamentally advocates for a balance between sea power and land power, contrasting with Mahan's singular focus on naval supremacy. From Corbett's perspective, naval and land forces should coordinate operations jointly, a concept he termed "maritime strategy," distinct from Mahan's naval-centric approach.³²

China boldly challenges US naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, bolstering its continuous presence around the fourth and fifth island chains. Military establishments in Djibouti, the acquisition of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, alongside Gwadar in Pakistan, and the installation of a military surveillance facility on Myanmar's Coco Island in the Bay of Bengal illustrate the geopolitical shift favoring China in the Indian Ocean.

The embodiment of Corbett's maritime strategy, emphasizing control of the sea, is aptly illustrated by China's strategic utilization of sea communication lines through initiatives like the BRI. Projects such as the colossal Colombo port city endeavor and the establishment of military surveillance facilities on Coco Island exemplify Corbett's wisdom in balancing both land and naval forces. Corbett articulates,

The object of naval warfare is to control maritime communications. In order to exercise that control effectively we must have a numerous class of vessels specially adapted for pursuit. But their power of exercising control is in proportion to our degree of command, that is, to our power of preventing their operations being interfered with by the enemy. Their own power of resistance is in inverse proportion to their power of exercising control; that is to say, the more numerous and better adapted they are for preying on commerce and transports, the weaker will be their individual fighting power.³³

³² John J. Klein, "Corbett in Orbit: A Maritime Model for Strategic Space Theory," *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 1 (2004), 90, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>.

³³ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 103.

A critical factor facilitating China's heightened involvement in the Indian Ocean is its astute strategy of consolidating both naval and land presence within its fourth and fifth island chains. In light of this, numerous instances demonstrate the successful integration of Corbett's strategic principles into China's strategic thinking.

China's Threat Perception

The concept of the Thucydides' trap was popularized by Harvard political scientist Alison Graham, who argued that war becomes inevitable when a great power's hegemony is challenged by an emerging power. Graham used this concept to illustrate the growing tensions between China and the United States in 2012. This idea was further elaborated upon in his book *Destined for War* in 2017, where he described the Thucydides' trap as the natural outcome when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, leading to structural stress that often results in violent conflict.³⁴

The current trajectory of Chinese strategic thinking is largely influenced by Beijing's increasing perception of threats, particularly its skeptical attitude towards the West. This perspective must be understood in the context of the historical humiliations endured by China at the hands of the West. Regarding China's hesitance to fully embrace liberal international law, Teemu Ruskola suggests that it may stem from the Chinese psyche still resonating with the memory of unequal treaties imposed on China by Western powers in the nineteenth century.³⁵

The explicit denial by the West of China's claims in the South China Sea following Chinese military exercises there in 2021 further heightened tensions. China has asserted its historical rights to the South China Sea, tracing back to the Han dynasty in the second century BCE. However, Western scholars argue that such claims lack legitimacy under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The ongoing naval activities conducted by the United States in the South China Sea are seen by China as provocative actions that reinforce its perception of threat, ultimately reinforcing China's naval strategy.

Conclusion

It is evident that the United States and its allies cannot ignore the rapid development of Chinese naval strategies in the Indian Ocean, prompting Washington to devise counterstrategies to deter Beijing. Collaborative efforts such as the

³⁴ Alison Graham, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (New York: Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

³⁵ Teemu Ruskola, *Legal Orientalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), <https://www.jstor.org/>.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and Australia–United States–United Kingdom (AUKUS) trilateral signal to China that complete naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean will not be unchallenged.³⁶ However, China’s determination to enhance its naval capabilities in the region poses a significant challenge to US and allied interests. Despite this, China’s lack of significant airpower presence in the Indian Ocean, as noted by Australian analyst David Brewster, presents a strategic limitation akin to challenges faced by the Soviets.³⁷

Nevertheless, China’s steadfast pursuit of a strong presence in the Indian Ocean persists, underscored by its focus on expanding its aircraft carrier fleet. Recent refurbishments and ongoing developments in aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines highlight China’s growing naval strength. While China may not achieve complete control of the Indian Ocean, its strategic approach, influenced by both Mahan and Corbett, allows it to navigate around such limitations. In sum, while China may not secure absolute sea control, its credible deterrent capacity against the United States and its allies in the Indian Ocean is likely. This analysis aligns with the strategic principles of Mahan and Corbett, demonstrating the enduring relevance of their insights in shaping contemporary Chinese naval strategy. ✪

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³⁶ Punsara Amarasinghe, “AUKUS: Another Balance of Power Tango,” *New Zealand International Review* 46, no. 6 (November–December 2021): 11–12, <https://search.informit.org/>.

³⁷ David Brewster, “Cold War offers clues about China’s plans for the Indian Ocean,” *The Strategist*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's Path to Institutionalization

A He and Feng Perspective

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Abstract

To maintain the power balance in the Indo-Pacific region, power dynamics are shifting, and small-scale alliances are expanding. This emerging arena of power struggles serves as the battleground for great-power competition, each vying to assert and uphold regional influence. As a counterweight to China's ascendant hegemony, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) emerges as a prominent and viable option within the region. Nevertheless, the institutionalization of the Quad presents inherent challenges. Addressing these challenges, this article employs Kai He and Huiyun Feng's leadership-institution model of institution building to conceptualize the Quad's institutionalization. This model delineates two forms of leadership: executive and ideational, which in combination yield four distinct institutional types. Through this framework, it becomes evident that the Quad possesses the requisite elements to evolve into a deeply institutionalized alliance.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, sprang into action in response to the devastation wrought by the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. All four major naval powers united under the banner of the Tsunami Core Group to deliver humanitarian and disaster relief.¹ Spearheading efforts to transform this coalition of democratic nations into an institution was Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe. In 2007, Abe formalized these efforts during a meeting of the group, though no official document was released.²

During the Malabar Naval Exercise of 2007, Quad members, including Japan and Australia, participated.³ However, staunch criticism from China, followed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's resignation and the election of Australia's Prime

¹ "The Quad," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, 3 August 2023, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

² Brahma Chellaney, "Quad Initiative: An inharmonious concert of democracies," *Japan Times*, 19 July 2007, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>.

³ Associated Press, "What is the Quad, and how did it come about?," *The Guardian*, 24 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

Minister Kevin Rudd in 2017, advocating for a less confrontational approach with China, led to the untimely demise of the group.⁴ Nonetheless, the concept persisted in Shinzo Abe's mind, evident in his 2012 article, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond."⁵

Each participating government clarified that Quad 1.0, as it was later dubbed, would lack military aspects and would not target any specific country. Despite this, both China and Russia viewed it as a covert military alliance, with China likening it to an Asian NATO.⁶

The idea of Quad was again resurrected in 2017, later termed Quad 2.0. The Quad members convened during the ASEAN Summit in Manila, Philippines.⁷ However, instead of issuing joint statements, the four nations released four separate press releases, each outlining distinct regional strategic goals and preferences.⁸

Despite these disparities, the Quad gained momentum, culminating in its first ministerial-level meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on 27 September 2019.⁹ In 2021, the Quad furthered its institutionalization, as Quad leaders met virtually in the first leader-level summit on March 12, 2021, and also released a joint statement titled "The Spirit of the Quad."¹⁰ However, the tone of prominent officials from member countries differed on many counts. For example, the Biden administration emphasized the point that "Quad is an unofficial gathering" and added that there was no "military dimension to it or security dimension."¹¹ This was just before the first in-person meeting of the Quad members. Former Indian Army Chief General MM Narvane, on the other hand, stated that, unlike

⁴ Bhupinder Singh and Sarah Teo, "Introduction: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, ed. Bhupinder Singh, and Sarah Teo (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 8.

⁵ Shinzō Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>.

⁶ Shyam Saran, "The Quadrilateral: Is it an alliance or an alignment?," *Hindustan Times*, 25 November 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>.

⁷ Ankit Panda, "US, Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on Regional Cooperation," *The Diplomat*, 13 November 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁸ Jagannath P. Panda, "India's Call on China in the Quad: A Strategic Arch between Liberal and Alternative Structures," *Rising Power Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2018): 83–111, <https://risingpowersproject.com/>.

⁹ Indrani Bagchi, "Quad foreign ministers to meet on sidelines of UNGA," *Times of India*, 21 September 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

¹⁰ "Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: 'The Spirit of the Quad'" (press release, The White House, 12 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>).

¹¹ "Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials Previewing the Quad Leaders Summit and Bilateral Meeting with India" (press release, The White House, 23 September 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

NATO, the Quad would concentrate on military cooperation among its member countries rather than building a military alliance.¹²

The objective of Quad 2.0 was to prevent any single country from exerting dominance over the Indo-Pacific region. Subsequent Quad meetings post-2017 were predominantly focused on security concerns, including Chinese encroachment in the South and East China Seas, upholding a rules-based global order, and advocating for a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, in response to the pandemic, the four governments committed to distributing one billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the region.

Concurrently, the Quad countries initiated discussions on broader issues such as climate change and critical and emerging technologies. This led to the establishment of the Quad Climate Working Group and the Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group, aimed at setting standards in technologies like 5G and Artificial Intelligence, while also addressing the escalating threats in cyberspace. Despite being perceived primarily as a counterbalance to Chinese influence, the incorporation of diverse agendas indicates a broader concern for addressing various challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region.¹³

Following the senior-level military commander meeting of the Quad members, which also included the United Kingdom and acknowledged China as an “epoch-defining challenge,”¹⁴ in California on 15–17 May 2023, preceding the Quad leaders’ summit, debates surrounding the Quad’s security orientation resurfaced. The potential addition of security dimensions could propel this group into Quad 3.0 status, yet definitive assertions on this matter remain elusive. Described as a routine gathering to address shared security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, this summit reignited discussions and suspicions regarding the securitization of the Quad, reminiscent of earlier iterations like Quad 1.0. Despite this, the focus on nontraditional security challenges, such as natural catastrophes, underscores the necessity for military involvement in delivering relief efforts.¹⁵

US President Joe Biden hosted the Quad Leaders’ Summit, marking the first in-person gathering of leaders from Quad nations, at the White House. Quad

¹² Press Trust of India, “Quad won’t be military alliance but there will be military cooperation among members: Army Chief MM Naravane,” *Economic Times*, 26 March 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

¹³ Premesha Saha, “First Quad leaders meeting: An agenda beyond security,” *ORF*, 16 March 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

¹⁴ *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world* (London: UK Government, March 2023), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/>.

¹⁵ Premesha Saha and Vivek Mishra, “QUAD 3.0: A security-oriented reincarnation?” *ORF*, 8 June 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

foreign ministers convene annually to exchange perspectives and bolster cooperation on pivotal regional strategic challenges.¹⁶ Additionally, Quad leaders have committed to annual meetings. The Quad Leaders' Summit of 2023 took place in Hiroshima, Japan, convened by Australia on 20 May 2023, underscoring the increasing alignment among Quad leaders within this coalition.¹⁷

The Quad is increasingly prominent due to China's rise and its unilateral and ambiguous policies, notably evidenced in the South China Sea (SCS) through initiatives like the nine-dash line. China's utilization of economic leverage to secure strategic deals with smaller nations further underscores its alternative worldview, which opposes the liberal world order and the rule of law, often characterized by a disregard for human rights and support for dictatorial regimes.

The overt declarations by Xi Jinping, urging China to prepare for war and remain poised to act at a moment's notice, indicate a belligerent stance.¹⁸ The US *National Security Strategy* of 2022 categorizes China as the primary competitor seeking to reshape the international order. This designation is grounded in China's assertive behavior, prompting other nations to take defensive measures to safeguard their sovereignty. The strategy is underpinned by three principal pillars: investment, alignment, and competition. Firstly, the United States aims to invest in bolstering its domestic strengths, focusing on enhancing competitiveness, fostering innovation, building resilience, and fortifying its democracy. These investments are deemed essential for maintaining a competitive edge globally. Secondly, the United States endeavors to align its efforts with its network of allies and partners, acting cohesively with shared purpose to amplify collective influence and shape the global strategic landscape. Thirdly, the United States intends to compete responsibly with the People's Republic of China (PRC) to safeguard its interests and advance its vision for the future. This competition is deemed imperative considering China's articulated intentions and expanding capabilities to reshape the international order. The overarching objective of this strategy is to uphold a world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure, leveraging all facets of national power to outcompete strategic rivals, address common challenges, and influence the establishment of global norms.

¹⁶ "Quad Framework and Engagement" (briefing, Ministry of External Affairs, 29 November 2022), <https://mea.gov.in/>.

¹⁷ "Quad Leaders' Summit 2023" (fact sheet, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government, 2023), <https://www.pmc.gov.au/>.

¹⁸ John Pomfret and Matt Pottinger, "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War," *Foreign Affairs*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>; and Liu Zhen, "Xi Jinping orders China's military to be ready for war 'at any second'," *South China Morning Post*, 5 January 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

It underscores the importance of international collaboration amid the backdrop of intensifying competition.¹⁹

The Japanese *Defence White Paper* of 2022 unequivocally asserts that China persistently engages in unilateral actions aimed at altering or attempting to alter the status quo through coercion in the East China Sea and South China Sea, posing a significant threat to regional stability and international norms. Moreover, the paper highlights China's explicit intentions concerning Taiwan, emphasizing its readiness to unify Taiwan by force, escalating tensions and shifting the military balance in China's favor. This stance underscores the importance of closely monitoring the situation, especially amid Russia-China convergence and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The document also underscores the role of shared universal values of democracy and freedom in guiding Japan's solidarity with Taiwan, interpreting China's increased military activities as unilateral attempts to alter the status quo, and calling for international cooperation against such global challenges. Furthermore, it notes that China's heightened aggression, particularly concerning Taiwan, has prompted Japan to adopt a more assertive stance, prioritizing security considerations over economic cooperation. Given the intensified strategic competition between the United States and China, Japan emphasizes its alignment with the United States, which has committed to enhancing engagement with Taiwan, stressing the necessity of developing defense capabilities while increasing cooperation and partnerships with other nations, further bolstering the Japan–United States alliance.²⁰

Former Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat of India asserted that China poses a greater security threat to India than Pakistan, based on his assessment of regional strategic dynamics. This shift in focus from Pakistan to China marks a significant change in India's security outlook, influenced by factors such as China's rapid military modernization, assertive behavior along the India-China border, and growing influence in South Asia. General Rawat's warning about India's readiness to respond to any misadventure by China underscores the heightened tensions, particularly exacerbated by incidents like the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020. This perspective has informed India's participation in the Quad, as part of a broader strategy to balance China's increasing power in the Indo-Pacific. General Rawat's assessment has thus shaped India's strategic approach to regional

¹⁹ *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, 12 October 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

²⁰ *Defence of Japan 2022* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 2022), <https://www.mod.go.jp/>.

security arrangements like the Quad, reflecting evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region.²¹

Australia's *Defence Strategic Review* of 2023 warns of China's sovereignty claims in the SCS, which threaten the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, impacting Australia's national interests. Emphasizing the need for closer integration with the United States, the review focuses on countering the threat posed by China's strategic competition. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government prioritizes the Quad, aiming to elevate its ambition on climate change. The Albanese government's approach to the Quad aligns with Australia's commitment to a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific, emphasizing international cooperation amid growing competition.²²

All Quad members share a common vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) region and express reservations about China's expanding military capabilities and assertive conduct in the region.

John Hemmings advocated for transforming the Quad into a formal alliance, drawing parallels from historical examples to emphasize the necessity of institutionalizing the Quad. He cited the Triple Entente, comprising France, Britain, and Russia, as an informal understanding lacking defense obligations, which failed to deter Nazi aggression in the lead-up to World War II. Hemmings highlighted the pivotal role of NATO in containing the Soviet Union post-World War II, underscoring the effectiveness of formal alliances in maintaining security. He noted the eagerness of post-Soviet democratic nations to join NATO, indicating widespread support for conventional alliance structures. Hemmings asserted that the institutionalization of the Quad is imperative for preserving the rule of law and the liberal international order amid China's rising hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region. He stressed that considering Chinese nationalism and its escalating desire for hegemony, only a complete alliance could serve as the linchpin for regional security.²³

The Quad members possess a myriad of treaties and agreements facilitating collaboration and the capacity to counter China's assertive policies in the region. Among these, the ANZUS Treaty stands as one of the oldest alliances, forged in 1951 among Australia, New Zealand, and the United States to safeguard Pacific

²¹ "China biggest security threat, says General Bipin Rawat," *Times of India*, 13 November 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

²² *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

²³ John Hemmings, "Should the Quad Become a Formal Alliance?," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 2 (March–April 2022), 65–77, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

security. Established in 1971, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) further solidified security ties, encompassing Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Singapore to promote collective defense efforts. The US-Japan Security Treaty, signed in 1951, remains pivotal in guiding defense cooperation between the two nations. Notably, the United States and India have fortified their defense collaboration through the signing of all four basic defense agreements, including LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA, between 2016 and 2020. Additionally, the initiation of the Critical and Emerging Technology Initiative (iCET) underscores efforts to enhance industrial-military cooperation and strategic technology integration between the two nations' governments, corporations, and academic institutions.²⁴ India and Australia elevated their strategic partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic alliance in 2020, complemented by the signing of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Pact, a free trade agreement, underscoring the deepening of bilateral relations.²⁵ Furthermore, the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement inked between New Delhi and Tokyo in 2020 establishes a framework for supply and service exchange, fostering deeper collaboration between their armed forces.²⁶ The Joint Working Group aims to bolster cooperation across diverse domains, including 5G, Open RAN, Telecom Network Security, underwater cable systems, and Quantum Communication. These multifaceted partnerships and agreements within the Quad lay the groundwork for its institutionalization, marking a significant step toward greater regional stability and cooperation.

Conversely, India and Australia elevated their strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic alliance in 2020, marking a significant milestone in their bilateral relations. During the same period, the two nations inked the Economic Cooperation and Trade Pact, emblematic of their burgeoning economic ties. Similarly, New Delhi and Tokyo forged the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement in 2020, laying the groundwork for mutual supply and service exchange and paving the way for enhanced military collaboration. The Joint Working Group, established to bolster cooperation across various domains such as 5G, Open RAN, Telecom Network Security, underwater cable systems, and Quantum Communication, underscores the commitment to deepening ties. These alliances and agreements

²⁴ "United States and India Elevate Strategic Partnership with the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET)" (fact sheet, The White House, 31 January 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

²⁵ "India & Australia agree to bolster Comprehensive Strategic Partnership at 1st India-Australia Annual Summit in New Delhi," *All India Radio*, 10 March 2023, <https://web.archive.org/>.

²⁶ Viraj Solanki and Mariko Togashi, "India and Japan enhance cooperation despite their differences," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 23 May 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/>.

within the Quad framework not only exist on the surface but also serve as catalysts for the institutionalization of the Quad, heralding a new era of regional cooperation and stability.

The joint military exercises among Quad members further bolster the institutionalization of the Quad. For instance, exercises like AUSINDEX and Austra-Hind strengthen naval cooperation between India and Australia, while the annual Dharma Guardian and JIMEX exercises enhance military ties between India and Japan. Similarly, the Yudh Abhyas and Vajra Prahar exercises between the United States and India serve to deepen their strategic partnership. Additionally, joint and bilateral exercises like Keen Sword involving the United States and Japan, and Talisman Sabre involving Australia and the United States, contribute to interoperability and readiness. The Pitch-Black combat exercise hosted by the Royal Australian Air Force, with participation from the United States and India, further underscores the collaborative efforts within the Quad framework. Notably, the Malabar exercise, initiated in 1992 by India and the United States, has evolved into a multilateral naval wargame, including Japan and Australia, signaling a unified response to China's assertive military posture globally.²⁷

Table 1 contrasts projected key military systems by 2030 and 2040 between China and Quad nations, highlighting the importance of integrating Quad resources to align with China's anticipated capabilities in the future.²⁸

Table 1. Major weapon systems comparison, 2030–2040 estimates. (Source: Justin L. Diehl, "Indo-Pacific Deterrence and the Quad in 2030," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2021), 12, <https://media.defense.gov/>.)

Weapon Systems	United States	Australia	Japan	India	Quad Total	China
5th-generation fighters	1,321	72	417	0	1,468	200
Bombers	88	0	0	0	88	150–172
Major surface combatants	78	12	54	22	166	150
Submarines	25	12	22	24	83	70
Aircraft carriers	5	0	0	3	8	2

Note: All US numbers at 50 percent to account for other global activities and US homeland defense. Data drawn from multiple sources.

²⁷ Krishn Kaushik, "Explained: The Malabar Exercise of Quad nations, and why it matters to India," *Indian Express*, 31 August 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/>.

²⁸ Justin L. Diehl, "Indo-Pacific Deterrence and the Quad in 2030," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 97–122, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

The Quad nations are collaborating across strategic, political, economic, and digital domains. This cooperation lays the foundation for institutionalizing the Quad. What is needed now is the political will to actualize and mold the group into a mechanism aimed at curbing Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region.

Application of He and Feng's Leadership Institutional Model

Kai He and Huiyan Feng have devised a model to analyze the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific, which is now being applied to assess the institutionalization of the Quad.²⁹ Expanding upon Oran Young's insights into Leadership and Rationalist Institutional Theory, they have developed the Leadership Institutional Model. Within this framework, He and Feng introduce the concept of *leadership-institution*, which encompasses two distinct types of leadership: executive leadership and ideational leadership. Executive leadership pertains to a state's capacity to utilize its resources in addressing practical challenges, such as concerns regarding relative gains and collective action issues. Conversely, ideational leadership involves an individual leader's ability to introduce ideas and proposals that influence policy makers' perceptions of common interests in cooperation.

He and Feng outline two prerequisites for states to collaborate within an anarchical international system. Firstly, states must share common interests, a goal facilitated by ideational leadership. Secondly, they must address operational challenges hindering collaboration, including concerns about relative advantage and collective action. Here, executive leadership plays a crucial role in surmounting such obstacles.

Based on the combination of two types of leadership, four types of institutional types are possible:

1. Deep Institutionalization: Characterized by robust executive and ideational leadership.
2. Thin Institutionalization: Occurs when one form of leadership is robust—typically ideational—while the other is lacking, such as weak executive leadership.
3. Ad hoc Institutionalization: Emerges when one form of leadership, often executive, is strong, while the other—ideational—is deficient.
4. Non-Institutionalization: Marked by weaknesses in both ideational and executive leadership.

²⁹ Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "The institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific: problems and prospects," *International Affairs* 96, no.1 (2020): 149–168, <https://doi.org/>.

		Executive leadership	
		Strong	Weak
Ideational leadership	Strong	1 <i>Deep institutionalization</i> (EU)	2 <i>Thin institutionalization</i> (ASEAN)
	Weak	3 <i>Ad hoc institutionalization</i> (Four-country tsunami rescue mission, 2004)	4 <i>Non-institutionalization</i>

Figure 1. The leadership–institution model of institution building

Analysis of the Quad through the Leadership–Institutional Model

The revival of the Quad in 2017 can be attributed to the rapid ascent of China and its assertive policies within the region. Despite its previous dissolution in 2007, the Quad resurged from obscurity fueled by a heightened awareness of the China threat and its divergent global outlook. China’s utilization of economic leverage to bolster its military capabilities compelled the four democratic nations to unite, transforming the alliance into an operational force aimed at addressing China’s expanding influence. As China solidifies its presence, navigating this strategic challenge becomes paramount for the Quad nations. Consequently, applying the aforementioned model could serve as a pivotal step toward institutionalizing the Quad, albeit with inherent challenges.

Ideational Level

At the ideational level, the primary impetus behind the group is to counter China’s hegemonic ambitions. According to a policy brief from the Brookings Institution, China is actively seeking to undermine key pillars of the established order, transitioning from benefiting from to exploiting it for its own gain.³⁰ Furthermore, China is proposing new regimes or institutions to further its interests. Conversely, a report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace titled “Responding to China’s Complicated Views on International Order” highlights that China’s challenge to the international order directly affects the US–Japan al-

³⁰ Bruce Jones and Andrew Yeo, “China and the Challenge to Global Order,” *Brookings Institution*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

liance and its efforts to reshape regional security. Particularly, China's policy actions in the East and South China Seas pose a significant security challenge to the Washington-Tokyo alliance.³¹

Xi Jinping has introduced the Global Development Initiatives (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI) as components of his strategy to reform the global order. While both initiatives aim to enhance the development and security of all nations, they also serve China's interests by positioning it as a global leader, countering US influence, and offering an alternative to the US-led order. Despite their ambitious goals, the specifics of implementing the GDI and GSI remain unclear.³² Beijing supports institutions such as the World Bank and the Paris Climate Agreement when they align with Chinese interests, but disregards institutional arrangements that contradict its objectives and worldview, such as human rights standards. In emerging sectors like Internet governance, where norms are still evolving, China endeavors to advance its own agenda by promoting authoritarian standards.³³ This model finds resonance among authoritarian regimes, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, thereby expanding Chinese soft power.³⁴

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken affirmed, "China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing's vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world's progress over the past 75 years." During his address, he advocated for coexistence and cooperation with China while also highlighting China's illicit activities and authoritarian policies.³⁵ In an op-ed by Rory Medcalf titled "The Quad has seen off the sceptics and it's here to stay," it was noted that "the new Quad rhetoric is much about spirit and vision, but it is also about defining coexistence with China from a position of strength."³⁶ Hence, the Quad can facilitate the coordination of responses among the four democracies to address shared security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, including China's expanding military capabilities, aggressive actions in the SCS region, and cyber and economic coercion aimed primarily at smaller nations.

³¹ Mira Rapp-Hooper et al., "Responding to China's Complicated Views on International Order," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 10 October 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

³² Michael Schuman, Jonathan Fulton, and Tuvia Gering, "How Beijing's newest global initiatives seek to remake the world order," *Atlantic Council*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

³³ "China's Approach to Global Governance," Council on Foreign Relations, n.d., <https://www.cfr.org/>.

³⁴ Ulrich Menzel, "The Rise of China and the Future World Order," *GIS Reports*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/>.

³⁵ Antony J. Blinken, "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China" (speech, US Department of State, 22 March 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

³⁶ Rory Medcalf, "The Quad has seen off the sceptics and it's here to stay," *Australian Financial Review*, 15 May 2021, <https://www.afr.com/>.

Executive Level

At the executive level, the United States emerges as the preeminent actor. Its extensive global presence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, positions it naturally to lead this coalition of democracies. With military alliances spanning numerous countries and serving as a security guarantor for many in the region, the United States plays a pivotal role. The US-led international order faces challenges, especially concerning the SCS, where China's nine-dash line directly challenges the UNCLOS 1982 agreement on freedom of navigation.³⁷ Consequently, the Quad is viewed as a means to bolster the region's security framework by collaborating with existing organizations like AUKUS and the Five Eyes alliance.³⁸ The US *Indo-Pacific Strategy* commits to strengthening the Quad's partnership on various fronts, including climate change and critical technology.³⁹ While the hub-and-spoke model traditionally centered on the United States connecting allies like Japan, Australia, and South Korea, a modified approach, the network-based security system, is emerging. This system sees US allies, with amicable relations and mutual alliances, sharing security responsibilities.⁴⁰ Therefore, as a major Indo-Pacific power, the United States must lead efforts to safeguard freedom of navigation in the region.

Garima Mohan and Kristi Govella delineated three pivotal factors driving India's heightened engagement with the Quad. Firstly, amid border confrontations with China, the Quad symbolizes India's pivot towards deeper collaboration with the West. Secondly, it aligns with India's broader Indo-Pacific foreign policy objectives, bolstering efforts to ensure security in the Indian Ocean and advance initiatives like Act East by strengthening ties with Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. Thirdly, India's participation in the group contributes to enhancing its capabilities. India's leadership within the Quad is crucial as it facilitates the elevation of its status from a middle power to a great power within the Indo-Pacific construct. This leadership role also bolsters India's Act East and Extended Neighborhood Policy, further solidifying its regional influence.⁴¹ In 2015, New Delhi introduced the SAGAR vision to advance its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Addi-

³⁷ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "China must honour legally binding UNCLOS verdict on South China Sea," *Economic Times*, 9 July 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

³⁸ Garima Mohan and Kristi Govella, "The Future of the Quad and the Emerging Architecture in the Indo-Pacific," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 3 January 2023, <https://doi.org/>.

³⁹ *Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Washington: The White House, February 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁴⁰ Satoru Nagao, "India, Japan, and the Dragon's Fire: Making the Quad Work," *ORF*, 10 June 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

⁴¹ Amrita Jash, "The Quad Factor in the Indo-Pacific and the Role of India," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 78–85, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

tionally, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) during the East Asia Summit in Bangkok in 2019. The IPOI aims to ensure stability, security, and safety in the maritime domain, encompassing seven central pillars such as Maritime Security, Capacity Building, and Disaster Risk Reduction.⁴² In 2021, Australia, India, and Japan initiated the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative. Introduced amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it aimed to reduce dependence on China by highlighting the importance of risk management and continuity strategies to prevent supply chain disruptions. Additionally, the initiative reaffirmed their dedication to building robust supply networks.⁴³ Consequently, bolstering defense collaboration and fortifying strategic bonds with fellow Quad members indicates India's proactive engagement and constructive contribution to realizing the objectives and vision of the Quad.

The Quad collaboration stands as a pivotal component of Australia's foreign strategy, with the Australian government underscoring its constructive role in addressing paramount regional concerns such as cybersecurity and maritime security.⁴⁴ Australia's proactive engagement aligns with its Pacific Step-up policy, which aims to foster closer ties with Pacific Island States in response to China's growing influence in the region. This policy encompasses initiatives to enhance security and defense cooperation, invest in infrastructure, and bolster diplomatic presence in Pacific Island nations, consistent with the objectives of the Quad. As the largest development assistance partner in the Pacific, Australia is well-positioned to contribute to initiatives like the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure led by Japan, furthering the FOIP vision.⁴⁵ Additionally, Australia, alongside the United States and Japan, unveiled the Blue Dot Network in 2019, offering an alternative framework to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and reinforcing Australia's commitment to upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region through expanded partnerships and proactive leadership.

Tokyo and Delhi encounter similar challenges posed by Chinese territorial expansion near their borders. Satoru Nagao outlined three key characteristics of this expansion: first, China's disregard for international rules when annexing additional territories; second, China's tendency to expand its borders in regions experiencing a power vacuum; and third, China's utilization of non-military means,

⁴² *Quad Framework and Engagement* (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 7 February 2020), <https://mea.gov.in/>.

⁴³ "Australia-India-Japan Trade Ministers' Joint Statement on Launch of Supply Chain Resilience Initiative" (press release, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 27 April 2021), <https://pib.gov.in/>.

⁴⁴ "The Quad," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

⁴⁵ Poornima Vijaya, "Australia's Role in the Quad and Its Crumbling Ties with China," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 9 (2021): 136–44, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

such as the BRI, to extend its influence.⁴⁶ Consequently, collaboration between Japan and India becomes imperative, and both nations are making strides in this direction. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, launched jointly in 2017, serves as a response to the BRI, and ongoing dedication to this initiative, along with other endeavors in Africa, remains crucial.⁴⁷ Japan, along with its partners, advocates for a FOIP strategy, with Tokyo outlining three pillars to actualize this vision.⁴⁸

The Quad is driven by a shared commitment to upholding the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade, while also striving for economic prosperity and global harmony. Japan's active engagement in the group underscores its significant role within it, particularly given the immediate threat posed by China's expansionist actions. Since its inception in 2017, the Quad has evolved from a mere notion to a deeply institutionalized framework. Despite initial hesitations among its members to openly confront China, there is now a growing consensus to collectively counterbalance its influence. As a result, the Quad has transitioned from a state of thin institutionalization to one of deep institutionalization, indicating a solid foundation for concerted action in addressing Indo-Pacific challenges.

Initially, the Quad emerged with a strong underlying concept, reinforced by the executive leadership of a major power. This leadership ensures that the Quad operates with a clear sense of purpose and direction, leaving no space for non-institutionalization. Moreover, the group has consciously steered away from ad hoc arrangements, especially following its revival in 2017. Since its inception, the Quad has undergone a gradual process of institutionalization, starting from a relatively thin framework and progressing steadily toward deeper institutionalization. Despite some reluctance among its members to openly confront China, there is a growing consensus within the Quad to collectively counterbalance Chinese influence. This consensus reflects a maturing commitment to the Quad's shared objectives, signaling a trajectory towards greater institutional solidity and strategic coherence.

Initially, China viewed the Quad with a degree of nonchalance, but as the group evolved, its stance grew increasingly assertive. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi likened the Quad to "sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean," suggesting it would fade away quickly.⁴⁹ He further characterized the US *Indo-Pacific Strategy* as an

⁴⁶ Nagao, "India, Japan, and the Dragon's Fire."

⁴⁷ Aparjita Biswas, "Corridor in Uncertainty," *Telegraph Online*, 14 April 2022, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/>.

⁴⁸ *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (Tokyo: Ministry of External Affairs, 24 April 2023), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

⁴⁹ "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press" (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 9 March 2018), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

effort to establish a NATO-like alliance in the Indo-Pacific region with Quad members.⁵⁰ Wang claimed, “This strategy advocates the long-outdated Cold War mentality, promotes group confrontation and geopolitical games, and maintains the United States’ dominant position and hegemonic system.”⁵¹ Consequently, China regards the Quad with suspicion and closely monitors its interactions with other regional actors, viewing the group as a containment mechanism aimed at restraining China’s influence.⁵²

Many scholars may contend that the domestic circumstances and cultural dimensions of Quad members have not been thoroughly considered. This paper adopts the classical realism paradigm of international relations, which posits that countries act with a unified purpose, disregarding Waltz’s second image and steering clear of entanglement in domestic and cultural complexities within each nation. Nonetheless, this paper argues that domestic politics and cultural influences have had no significant impact on the evolution of the Quad, nor on the findings presented herein.

However, this model primarily focuses on state actors and their leadership qualities, neglecting the influence of other factors in international politics, such as historical legacies and economic interdependence. Additionally, it presents a static view of leadership and institutionalization, overlooking the Quad’s dynamic nature as a group. The continuous evolution of the Quad complicates the assessment of institutionalization levels, necessitating ongoing analysis and adaptation of the model. Nevertheless, the model remains important as it furnishes a framework for analyzing and discussing the Quad’s evolution and potential future trajectory.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current global landscape underscores the urgency for the institutionalization of the Quad. With the four democracies increasingly aligning their interests amidst China’s escalating assertiveness, advocating for a free and open Indo-Pacific and upholding a rule-based international order has become imperative. Collaboration among Quad nations is essential to collectively address security challenges while simultaneously engaging with China on various fronts. Furthermore, diversifying away from dependence on China through non-military

⁵⁰ “State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press” (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 7 March 2022), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

⁵¹ Global Times (@globaltimesnews), “This strategy advocates an outdated Cold War mentality,” Twitter, 13 October 2020, 3:16 PM, <https://twitter.com/>.

⁵² Zeng Tengjun, “Quad gears up but should mind perils,” *Global Times*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

measures such as establishing alternative supply chains and enhancing critical technology resilience is critical for long-term strategic resilience.

The model proposed by He and Feng offers valuable insights, highlighting the importance of strong ideas and decisive executive leadership in driving deep institutionalization. By bolstering the international order and ensuring stability in the Indo-Pacific, effective leadership within the Quad can effectively counter China's aggressive actions while safeguarding the sovereignty of smaller states. Ultimately, the Quad serves as a pivotal mechanism for navigating the complexities of maintaining, containing, and preserving the existing order in the Indo-Pacific region, offering pragmatic solutions to the multifaceted challenges ahead. 🌐

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Fueling a Superpower

Reprioritizing the US Air Refueling Fleet for Great-Power Conflict

MAJ CALEB EGLI, US AIR FORCE

Abstract

The US Air Force must retain the capacity to deploy bombers extensively into the Pacific to deter a potentially hostile People's Republic of China, despite the increasing threat of antiaccess/area denial measures hindering naval and conventional basing operations. Tankers play a crucial role in facilitating the operations of long-range bombers. Therefore, the Air Force should prioritize enhancing its air refueling fleet capability and capacity by garnering congressional support to transition entirely from the KC-135, procuring additional KC-46s, and expediting the acquisition of the next-generation tanker. Through analysis of unclassified sources and the Fiscal Year 24 National Defense Authorization Act, this article asserts that revitalizing the development and funding for the Air Force's aging air refueling fleet is imperative. Strengthening the US tanker fleet will guarantee a credible conventional strike deterrence capability over long distances, while also meeting the demands of joint force operation.

Our ability to project and sustain the force, the foundation of that is our air refueling capability. It makes us a global superpower.

—General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost
Commander, US Transportation Command

In 1986, US aircraft conducted strikes over Libya as part of Operation El Dorado Canyon, delivering a firm message to Mu'ammar Gadhafi in response to his regime's sponsorship of terrorism.¹ US Air Force KC-135 and KC-10 air refueling tankers played a crucial role in facilitating multiple refueling events with F-111s during a round-trip mission from the United Kingdom to target sites in Libya. This operation highlights the interconnected relationship between air refueling and long-range conventional strikes, which forms the foundation of the United States' credible deterrence strategy against distant threats. The

¹ Judy G. Endicott, "Raid on Libya: Operation Eldorado Canyon," in *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations*, ed. A. Timothy Warnock (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2000), 145–55, <https://media.defense.gov/>; and Walter J. Boyne, "El Dorado Canyon," *Air Force Magazine*, March 1999, 60, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

2022 *National Defense Strategy* emphasizes the significance of “combat-credible forces” in achieving integrated deterrence against hostile actors.²

However, the credibility of this deterrence is being challenged in the Indo-Pacific region, where an increasingly assertive People’s Republic of China (PRC) seeks to neutralize such deterrence through an expansive antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) network, compelling the United States to consider operating beyond the reach of enemy weapons. Conducting conventional strikes over extended distances in the Indo-Pacific necessitates superior technological capabilities, such as those possessed by stealth bombers, as well as sufficient fuel capacity, which relies on tanker support.

To ensure that long-range conventional strike capabilities remain viable, the Air Force should reallocate its investment toward enhancing the capability and capacity of its air refueling tankers, focusing on securing congressional support to transition from the KC-135 to the KC-46, acquiring additional KC-46s, and expediting the procurement of the next generation of tanker aircraft. Strengthening the US tanker fleet will uphold a credible deterrent posture through potent long-range strike capabilities while meeting the operational requirements of joint forces.

The backdrop for such deterrence is the increasingly aggressive posture of the PRC, necessitating solutions for projecting force over long distances. The People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force’s (PLARF) extensive missile arsenal and integrated sensor network extend its weapons engagement zone (WEZ) to a range of 3,000 km (1,620 nautical miles) for its primary antiship and land-attack missiles, effectively impeding force projection from US airfields or carrier strike groups without facing significant attrition.³

Moreover, the PLA Air Force’s (PLAAF) advanced fighter, the J-20, armed with the new PL-17 air-to-air missile, boasts a range of 1,500 km (684 nautical miles), which can be extended through PLAAF air refueling capabilities.⁴ Consequently, considering the PLA’s A2/AD threat, the deployment of bombers and tankers is likely to originate from outside the theater, where distance compounds operational challenges.

For instance, let’s examine the distances between Taiwan and the two major US regional bases beyond the PLA’s WEZ. Measuring from Taiwan Taoyuan

² 2022 *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 27 October 2022), 1, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

³ Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific*, 2nd edition (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022), 59.

⁴ Ryan Pickrell, “China’s Most Advanced Stealth Fighter May Now Be Able to Strike Targets at Greater Distances,” *Air Force Times*, 17 November 2018, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>; and Parth Satam, “China Reveals ‘World’s Longest Air-To-Air Missile’; PL-17 Missile Spotted On PLAAF’s J-16 Fighter Jet,” *Eur-Asian Times* (blog), 4 December 2023, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

International Airport, it spans 4,404 nautical miles (nm) to Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawai'i, and 3,449 nm to Diego Garcia Airbase in the Indian Ocean. The respective round-trip distances surpass the unrefueled ranges of the B-52 (7,652 nm), B-1 (6,478 nm), B-2, and B-21 (6,000 nm), without factoring in fuel costs associated with diversions to alternate airfields or weather conditions.⁵

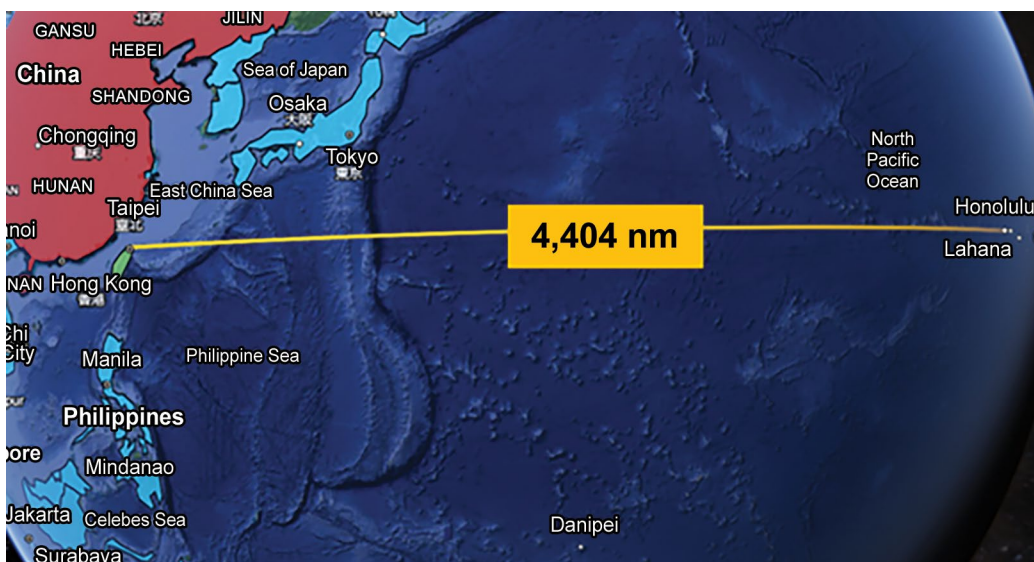


Figure 1. Distance from Honolulu to Taipei. (Created by the author using Google Earth with data from “Asia Outline with Countries,” *Cartography Vectors*, n.d., <https://cartographyvectors.com/>.)

Additionally, a direct route from Diego Garcia to Taipei traverses five different countries, including Chinese-controlled Hainan Island, necessitating a complex path to avoid potential threats, maintain operational secrecy, and comply with diplomatic protocols. These factors contribute to increased fuel consumption requirements.

The distance from the continental United States (CONUS) presents even greater challenges; the nominal one-way distance from Travis Air Force Base, California, to Taipei is 5,638 nm. Consequently, an effective conventional deterrent necessitates

⁵ The B-21’s nominal range is discussed in an open-source Australian policy report discussing whether to pursue purchasing the platform. Marcus Hellyer and Andrew Nicholls, “Impactful Projection: Long-Range Strike Options for Australia,” *Strategy*, December 2022, <https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/>; “B-21 Raider” (fact sheet, US Air Force, 2024), <https://www.af.mil/>; and “B-1B Lancer Archives,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

long-range strike capabilities to overcome the extensive A2/AD network of the PRC, underscoring the importance of a robust refueling fleet.

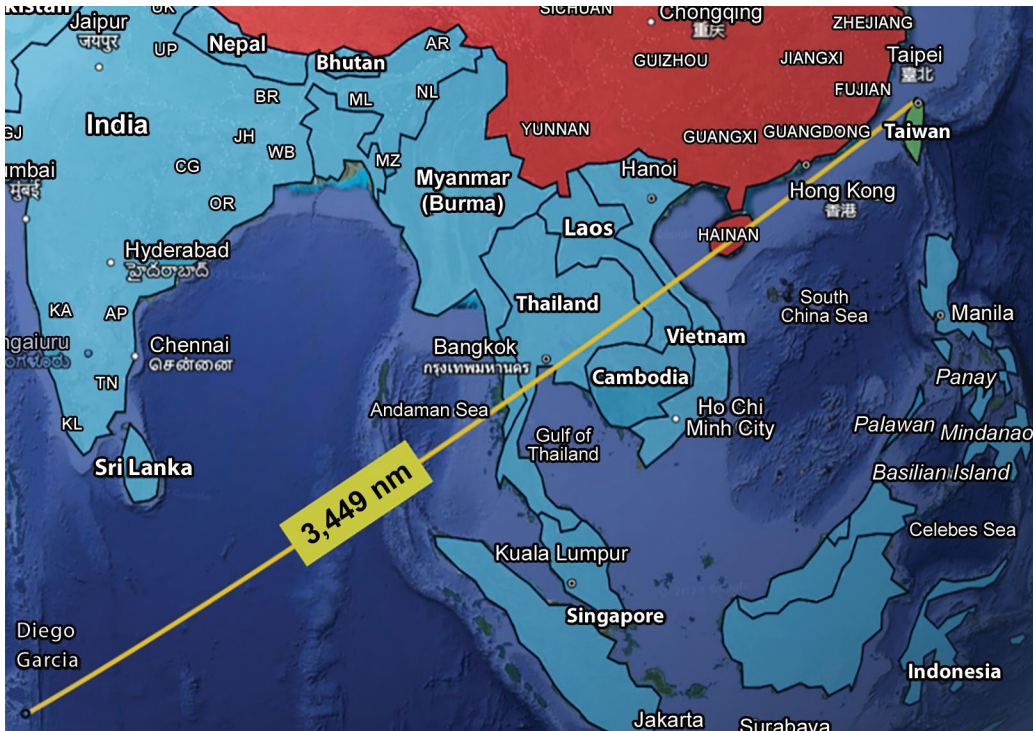


Figure 2. Distance from Diego Garcia to Taipei. (Created by the author using Google Earth with data from “Asia Outline with Countries,” *Cartography Vectors*, n.d., <https://cartographyvectors.com/>.)

Long-range stealth bombers represent one of the few viable options to penetrate the WEZ and engage targets effectively. Like the newly revealed B-21, stealth bombers possess air defense penetration capabilities that enable scalable precision strike operations at extended ranges. This capability has led strategists like Robert Haddick to assert, “Aircraft are the most effective predators of warships, and long-range bombers will rule the Indo-Pacific.”⁶

Moreover, Mark Conversino, Air University’s chief academic officer, contends, “A future El Dorado Canyon-style strike might require the use of air assets based in the United States, in the absence of permission from other nations to use their soil to launch a one-time raid against a rogue state or even to fly across

⁶ Haddick, *Fire on the Water*, 222.

their territory.”⁷ However, to fully utilize their stealth capabilities, bombers require the increased fuel capacity provided by the US tanker fleet to fulfill their designated *long-range* role.

In the Pacific theater, tankers play a vital role in providing the necessary fuel capacity for bombers. Air refueling serves as a force multiplier, enabling aircraft to extend their operational endurance beyond their unrefueled ranges. This capability is indispensable for global strike and mobility operations, particularly in the Indo-Pacific theater where it is essential for mission execution.⁸

When applied to the Indo-Pacific region, the term *crucial* underscores the indispensable nature of air refueling for mission success. In previous scenarios, tankers could refuel bombers before entering the WEZ on approach and just outside the WEZ on departure, ensuring they have the requisite fuel to accomplish their objectives. Additionally, the potential acquisition of a low-observable tanker could enable it to operate as a “stand-in” force, refueling bombers within the WEZ with reduced risk of detection and increased potential for maintaining operational surprise.

Hence, when Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin highlighted that “bombers . . . would have the range to prosecute targets without the need for bases close to enemy territory,” it was implicitly understood that such operations would rely on air refueling support.⁹ Nonetheless, the Air Force’s existing tanker fleet faces specific challenges related to their capacity and capabilities.

The Air Force’s strategically vital air refueling fleet faces significant challenges in terms of both capacity and capabilities, particularly concerning its mobility tankers. With an average airframe age surpassing 60 years, the 396-aircraft fleet of venerable KC-135s was introduced into the Air Force inventory back in 1956.¹⁰ Escalating maintenance requirements, dwindling access to skilled personnel, and a decline in the availability of spare parts have escalated operational costs associated with the KC-135. A 2023 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report examining Air Force aircraft availability rates between 2011 and 2021 revealed that the KC-135 fleet failed to meet its objectives for 8 of those 11 years, while

⁷ Mark J. Conversino, “The Changed Nature of Strategic Air Attack,” *Parameters* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 8, <https://doi.org/>.

⁸ Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-36: *Air Mobility Operations* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Curtis E. Lemay Center, 28 June 2019), 56, <https://www.doctrine.af.mil/>.

⁹ John A. Tirpak, “Kendall: Ratio of Fighters to Bombers May Shift Toward Bombers in the Future,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 2 May 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

¹⁰ “KC-135 Stratotanker” (fact sheet, US Air Force, 2024), <https://www.af.mil/>; and “Boeing KC-97L Stratofreighter” (fact sheet, National Museum of the United States Air Force, 2024), <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/>.

operational expenses steadily rose since 2016.¹¹ Despite the tanker's advancing age, the critical need for net air refueling capacity compelled the Air Force to operate the KC-135 for two years with a degraded autopilot system, accepting heightened risks to pilot fatigue to mitigate risks to mission accomplishment.¹² In terms of capabilities, the KC-135 possesses a nascent tactical datalink for battlespace awareness and lacks defensive systems, hindering joint interoperability and rendering it vulnerable to threats like A2/AD.

The versatile KC-10 served as a temporary solution while the Air Force pursued various tanker acquisition initiatives, ultimately leading to the development of the KC-46. Although capable of carrying more cargo and fuel than the KC-135, the service never procured the KC-10 in sufficient quantities to justify its long-term sustainability. The Air Force is set to phase out the KC-10 fleet by September 2024, having already completed its final combat sortie.¹³

Despite encountering initial challenges during its introduction, the newest addition to the Air Force tanker fleet, the KC-46, represents a much-needed enhancement in both capacity and capabilities. The Air Force, cognizant of risks, accepted the KC-46 from Boeing with seven significant airframe deficiencies, which remain unresolved.¹⁴ While offering significantly improved cargo capacity compared to the KC-135, the KC-46's offload capacity, only marginally exceeding that of the KC-135, represents a functional decline in refueling capacity over time as newer fighter platforms exhibit increased fuel burn rates with successive generations, underscoring the need for a larger tanker fleet.¹⁵ The Air Force intends to acquire 179 KC-46s to meet a Title-10 designated end strength of 466 total tankers of all

¹¹ Diana Maurer et al., *Weapon System Sustainment Aircraft Mission Capable Goals Were Generally Not Met and Sustainment Costs Varied by Aircraft*, Report to Congressional Committees (Washington, DC: US Government Accountability Office, November 2022), 55–60, <https://www.gao.gov/>.

¹² Rachel S. Cohen, "KC-135 Tanker Autopilot Now Safer to Use in Flight, Air Force Says," *Air Force Times*, 21 September 2023, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>.

¹³ Rachel S. Cohen, "KC-10 Tanker Flies Last Combat Mission as Retirement Looms," *Air Force Times*, 6 October 2023, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>.

¹⁴ Greg Hadley, "KC-46 Update: Where Things Stand With Every Deficiency," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

¹⁵ "KC-46A Pegasus" (fact sheet, US Air Force, 2024), <https://www.af.mil/>; and Air Force Pamphlet (AFPAM) 10-1403: *Air Mobility Planning Factors*, 24 October 2018, 17, Table 9, <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

variants.¹⁶ Despite ongoing maturation, the KC-46 boasts enhanced connectivity and battlespace awareness capabilities and is several decades newer than other tankers in the fleet, positioning it as the most viable tanker option in the short term as the Air Force explores future air refueling platforms.

Air Force leaders have expressed a commitment to enhancing air refueling tanker capacity and capabilities. In testimony to Congress, General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost emphasized the critical role of the air refueling fleet, describing it as “the backbone of rapid global mobility and is our most stressed capability,” and stating, “We must continue recapitalizing the KC-135s and KC-10s with KC-46s.”¹⁷ Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall has also voiced concerns about the current tanker fleet:

Of particular concern is the survivability of our tankers, which have to be far enough forward to refuel fighters close enough to the threat that they can operate effectively. . . . Our preliminary assessment is that this will mandate a more survivable tanker that is not a derivative of a commercial aircraft. As a result, we have begun the effort to define the concept for this new capability, which will be competitively procured. One possibility is a blended wing body design. We intend to conduct an Analysis of Alternatives for this new platform, named Next Generation Aerial Refueling System [*sic*] (NGAS), in 2024.¹⁸

The Air Force is currently planning to introduce the Next-Generation Air-Refueling System (NGAS) tanker by 2035, aiming for enhanced survivability in contested environments. This entails incorporating features such as low observability and

¹⁶ Greg Knepper and Peter W. Singer, “Short Legs Can’t Win Arms Races: Range Issues and New Threats to Aerial Refueling Put U.S. Strategy at Risk,” *War on the Rocks*, 20 May 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/>; “KC-46A Pegasus”; Brian Everstine, “Budget Cuts Legacy Tankers Despite KC-46 Delays,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>; Brian W. Everstine, “The Tanker Gap,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 1 April 2020, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>; Stephen Losey, “US Air Force Reworks Tanker Modernization Plans, Slashes next Buy,” *Defense News*, 7 March 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/>; Stephen Losey, “US Air Force Awards Boeing \$2.3B Contract for 15 More KC-46s,” *Defense News*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/>; “10 USC 9062: Policy; Composition; Aircraft Authorization,” 21 March 2024, <https://uscode.house.gov/>.

¹⁷ David Vergun, “General Expresses Concerns Over Readiness in Sealift, Air Refueling,” *DOD News*, 27 April 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>; and Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Posture of United States European Command and United States Transportation Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2024 and the Future Years Defense Program” (Washington, DC, 27 April 2023), 26, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

¹⁸ “Kendall Outlines Clear Path for Modernizing Air, Space Forces & Confronting Peer Competition,” Air Force Public Affairs, 7 March 2023, <https://www.af.mil/>.

improved joint interoperability, which are crucial in an A2/AD scenario.¹⁹ There is even consideration for remote piloting capabilities, akin to the Navy's MQ-25 carrier-based air refueling drone, to minimize risks to human operators while maximizing fuel capacity.²⁰

However, translating desired capabilities into an operationally capable aircraft often presents significant challenges.²¹ While the Air Force's NGAS acquisition strategy is still under review, it is improbable that a commercially available solution could meet the stringent requirements of a next-generation tanker, potentially necessitating a costly and time-consuming design process from scratch.²² Given the Air Force's recent experiences with the KC-46 program, the goal of fielding an NGAS tanker by 2035 may be overly optimistic, particularly considering it comes eight years after the PLA's accelerated modernization goal set for 2027.²³

Despite key stakeholders advocating for increased capacity and capabilities, the current funding prioritization for air refueling development indicates a lack of urgency. Examining budget allocations reveals the low prioritization of air refueling procurement and research funding. In the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), no new funds were allocated for mobility tanker procurement or research efforts.²⁴ While air refueling received increased attention in the FY24 NDAA, including funding for 15 of the planned 179 KC-46s and some NGAS research, the overall procurement spending for airlift aircraft decreased. In contrast, the F-35 and B-21 programs received significant increases in research, development, training, and evaluation funding, while kinetic aircraft procurement saw a substantial rise.²⁵ Notably, the FY24 NDAA allocated USD 2.33 billion to Next Generation Air Dominance research compared to only

¹⁹ Stephen Losey, "US Air Force to Issue New Refueling Tanker Request in September," *Defense News*, 2 August 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

²⁰ "MQ-25TM Stingray" (fact sheet, NAVAIR, 2024), <https://www.navair.navy.mil/>.

²¹ Senior officer, interview by the author, 11 December 2023. Information obtained under conditions of nonattribution.

²² Losey, "US Air Force to Issue New Refueling Tanker Request."

²³ "The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Outline of Long-Term Goals for 2035," Xinhuanet, 13 March 2021, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/>, translated by Google. See also Kyle Amonson and Dane Egli, "The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing's Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (March–April 2023): 37–53, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

²⁴ "Summary of the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act" (United States Senate Committee On Armed Services, 15 December 2022), 7, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

²⁵ *Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Overview* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 2023), 19–25, <https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/>.

USD 7.93 million for NGAS—nearly 300 times more for fighter development than air refueling.²⁶

Furthermore, Congress imposed restrictions on the procurement of additional KC-46s beyond the contracted number and mandated the retention of KC-135s until the Air Force provides validated needs and long-term cost estimates. This effectively freezes the configuration of the Air Force tanker fleet, potentially compromising operational capabilities if a plan to modernize the fleet is not convincingly presented to Congress.²⁷

Some observers may question the prioritization of air refueling funding over other pressing requirements. For example, planners could potentially mitigate the need for additional tankers by diversifying supply and force projection nodes, an effort Congress has allocated USD 8.9 billion toward since FY20, expanding and negotiating access to 66 basing sites.²⁸ If the USINDOPACOM theater were to escalate into open conflict, the immediate demand for fighter and bomber platforms, along with their associated support elements, might initially seem adequately met by the hundreds of tankers already in the Air Force fleet. Moreover, modifying existing tankers could offer a quicker alternative to enhancing battlespace awareness, as proposed by the Air Reserve Component A5/A8 regarding KC-135s, instead of investing in costly new tanker acquisitions.²⁹ Additionally, the Air Force could alleviate theater air refueling requirements by collaborating with allies, as demonstrated by Singaporean A330s refueling USAF B-1 bombers.³⁰ However, it is crucial to carefully consider the potentially escalatory implications of emphasizing a strategy centered on long-range bombers when evaluating partnerships with regional allies and partners. Thus, critics may view increased investment in air refueling as a misallocation of resources, particularly when kinetic solutions also require updates and programmatic research, and alternative approaches exist for addressing air refueling shortfalls.

²⁶ Senate, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 Conference Report*, December 2023, 1794, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

²⁷ House, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024*, 118th Cong., 1st sess., 2023, H.R. 2670, sections 141 & 145.

²⁸ Luke A. Nicastro, *U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 6 June 2023), 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

²⁹ David Rodriguez, “The Air Reserve Component’s Impact on Modernizing Legacy Aircraft to Complement the Advanced Battle Management System: KC-135 RTIC and the Gladiator Pod” (master’s thesis, Air Force Institute of Technology, June 2021), 27, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

³⁰ “US B-1B Lancers Conduct Air-to-Air Refueling Training with Republic of Singapore Air Force,” Pacific Air Forces Public Affairs, 19 January 2024, <https://www.pacaf.af.mil/>.

Table 1. US Indo-Pacific Command allied and partner boom tankers

Country	Projected # of Tankers	Models
Japan	10	KC-46 (ordered), KC-767
Australia	7	KC-30A, A330
Singapore	6	A330
India	6*	TBD, desired in 2024
South Korea	4	A330
Indonesia	2*	TBD, planned by 2024
Total	35	

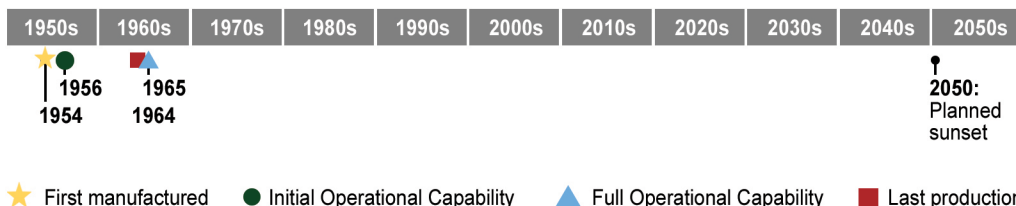
While acknowledging the validity of these arguments, investing in tankers will undoubtedly enhance theater logistical resilience and expand strategic options. As the Air Force presence becomes more dispersed across multiple bases, the demand for logistical “connectors” like tankers will inevitably increase to facilitate decentralized execution.³¹ Additionally, while a USD 2 million Air Battle Management System (ABMS) compatible upgrade may enhance the short-term capabilities of a single KC-135, allocating the remainder of the USD 800 million toward platforms inherently equipped with battlespace awareness, such as the KC-46, could yield greater long-term benefits.³² Transitioning to more capable systems sooner could also expedite the reallocation of approximately USD 3.7 billion per year, or USD 92 billion over the remaining lifespan of the KC-135, toward its maintenance and operation.³³

³¹ Chris Dougherty, *Buying Time: Logistics for a New American Way of War* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, April 2023), 19, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/>.

³² Rodriguez, “The Air Reserve Component’s Impact,” 65; and Ryan Sutherland, “UTNG KC-135 Modernizing for the Future,” 155th Air Refueling Wing, 13 April 2021, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/>.

³³ Maurer et al., *Weapon System Sustainment Aircraft Mission Capable Goals*, 56.

KC-135 Life Cycle Timeline



KC-135 Sustainment Status

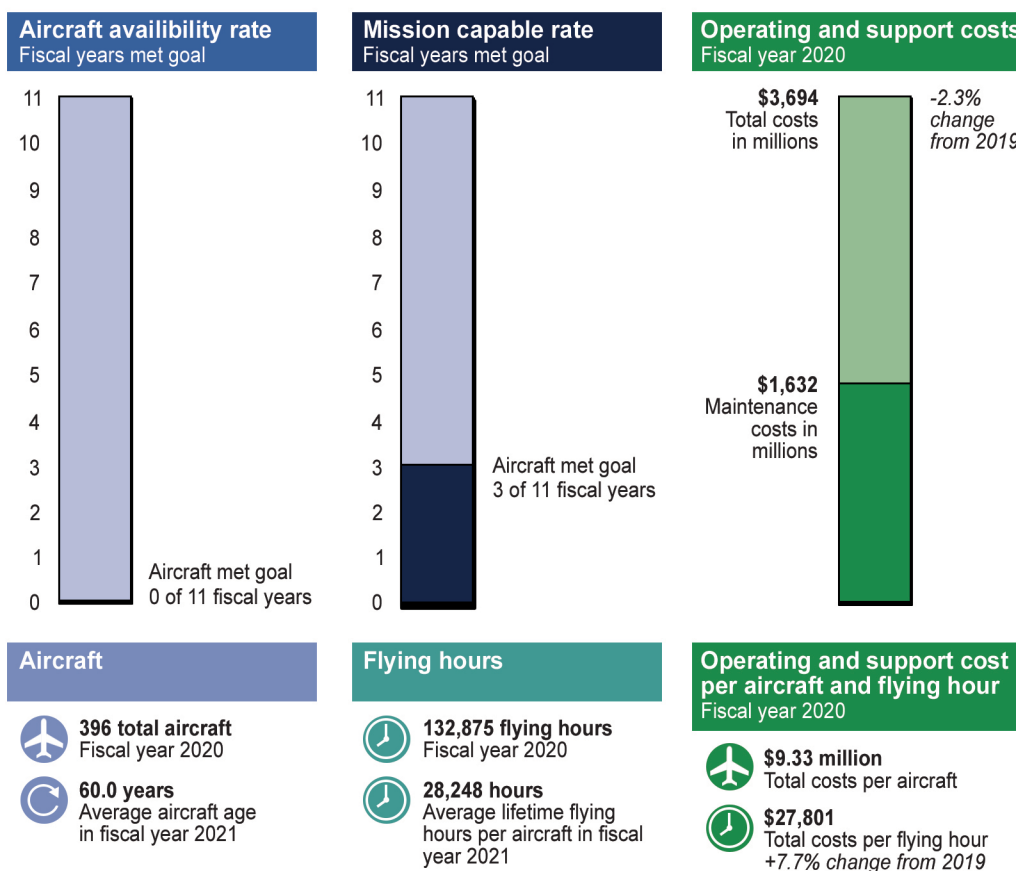


Figure 3. KC-135 GAO report breakout. (Source: *Weapon System Sustainment Aircraft Mission Capable Goals Were Generally Not Met and Sustainment Costs Varied by Aircraft*, Report to Congressional Committees (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, November 2022), 56 <https://www.gao.gov/>.)

Considering the utilization of regional air refueling support, while highly skilled and integrated regional allies and partners possess compatible air refueling aircraft, their combined capacity would equate to roughly three USAF tanker squadrons at best. While this support is beneficial, it may not be decisive, particularly given the uncertainty surrounding availability due to host nation operational requirements and political considerations.³⁴ Addressing the imperative to mitigate escalatory messaging with our partners is a crucial aspect of planning. Beyond the challenges posed by PLA A2/AD threats, the United States must carefully consider the inadvertent consequences of potentially making our allies and partners targets by association, particularly in the context of implementing a conventional deterrent strategy. An illustrative example of this occurred in February 2024 when, partly to avoid utilizing bombers from neighboring nations, the Air Force deployed B-1s from Dyess AFB, Texas for CONUS-to-CONUS missions to strike Iran-backed militia targets in Iraq and Syria. This approximately 12,400 nm round trip was made feasible by tanker support, akin to the role played by KC-135s out of RAF Mildenhall in the United Kingdom.³⁵ Therefore, to minimize the exposure of regional allies and conduct targeted information operations effectively, the Air Force may need to launch bombers from US territory to avoid potentially implicating regional allies and partners. This underscores the heightened necessity for tankers to serve as a critical bridge in facilitating such operations. This brings us to the final consideration: right-sizing the current tanker fleet.

Expanding the USAF air refueling fleet is imperative to ensure a robust long-range conventional deterrent while concurrently meeting joint force requirements, a necessity that would only intensify in the event of conflict. While limited access to classified posture statements, wargames, planning assumptions, and operations plans hinders a detailed analysis, it is feasible to approximate how many tankers would be available for worldwide contingency operations, providing a foundational basis for recommendations. Historical data points regarding inevitable expenses

³⁴ Chris Popcock, "Singapore Gets Smart with Airbus A330 Tanker," *Aviation International News*, 12 February 2020, <http://backend.ainonline.com/>; Amrita Nayak Dutta, "To Fill a Critical Gap, Indian Air Force Looks to Buy Six Mid-Air Refuellers," *Indian Express*, 30 August 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/>; "Japan Orders Two More Boeing KC-46A Tankers" (news release, Boeing, 29 November 2022), <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/>; Ridzwan Rahmat, "Indonesia Puts KC-46A Pegasus, Airbus A330 in Frame for Aerial Tanker Requirement," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 18 January 2018, <https://archive.ph/>; "KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker Transport" (fact sheet, Royal Australian Air Force, 24 October 2022), <https://www.airforce.gov.au/>; and Jon Lake, "A330 MRTT Tanker Enters RoKAF Service," *Asian Military Review*, 21 February 2019, <https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/>.

³⁵ Air Force Global Strike Command (@AFGlobalStrike), "Last Friday, five KC-135 Stratotankers from @RAFMildenhall refueled B-1 Lancers assigned to the @28thBombWing over the Atlantic in support of the airstrikes in Iraq and Syria against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and affiliated militia groups." X, 8 February 2024, 1:13pm, <https://twitter.com/>.

such as training, major maintenance, and homeland defense enable an estimation of the required force strength.

Tanker Force Availability Estimation

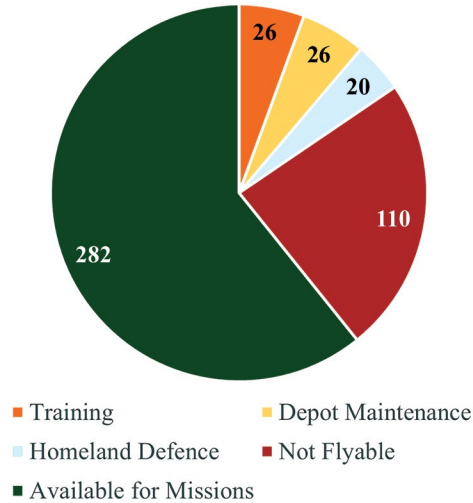


Figure 4. Representative estimation of tanker availability

Presently, there are 26 KC-135s and KC-46s stationed at the tanker schoolhouse at Altus AFB, Oklahoma, serving as a basis for training allocation.³⁶ Additionally, estimated data suggests that 26 tankers of both types would be simultaneously undergoing major maintenance, based on demonstrated KC-46 depot capacity combined with environmental planning data for the KC-135 depot.³⁷ Furthermore, an undisclosed number of tankers are on alert to support homeland defense fighters and command-and-control assets, with historical figures indicating a peak of 75 tankers post-9/11 and a steady state of eight in 2005.³⁸

Another notable instance reported having 20 tankers airborne several months following 9/11, serving as a plausible estimate for an escalated wartime homeland

³⁶ The author served as a KC-135 schoolhouse instructor from 2019 to 2023. The author would like to thank Mrs. Nicole Valence for her assistance in confirming this detail.

³⁷ *Environmental Assessment KC-46A Depot Maintenance Activation Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma Volume 1* (Tinker AFB, OK: 72nd Air Base Wing, 25 July 2014), Table 4-6 (<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA607210.pdf>); and *KC-46A Tanker Modernization (KC-46A)*, Selected Acquisition Report (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Acquisition Visibility Environment, December 2022), 8, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/>.

³⁸ Mark J. Reents, "Operation Noble Eagle and the Use of Combat Air Patrols for Homeland Defense" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, December 2008), 22–24, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

defense allocation.³⁹ Therefore, by rough approximation, a force consisting of 466 tankers could anticipate approximately 66 tails (16 percent) being allocated to training units, depot maintenance, and homeland defense. While these figures may vary, the essential requirement categories remain relatively consistent.

Even amid large-scale combat operations, the Air Force would continue to face the necessity of training new pilots and boom operators, conducting major maintenance, and safeguarding the homeland. Assessing the remaining tanker force, recent trends in mission capability rates indicate that slightly more than 71 percent would remain functional for missions.⁴⁰ Consequently, out of the 466 tankers, the Air Force could reasonably expect approximately 282 available (60 percent) for operations worldwide. This includes sustaining a long-range bomber air bridge in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the multifaceted demands on air refueling assets.

When strategizing for a peer-to-peer conflict, the unavoidable attrition of forces would further diminish the available fleet. PLAAF doctrine, which prioritizes targeting high-value airborne assets like tankers in the initial stages of any conflict, could lead to debilitating effects on theater operations, as confirmed by high-level wargames.⁴¹ Consequently, the remaining tankers would need to fulfill the diverse demands of all combatant commanders worldwide while upholding a credible long-range bomber deterrent.

As recently as 2016, USTRANSCOM expressed uncertainty regarding the adequacy of tankers to fulfill their combined missions. The 2016 Mobility Capabilities and Requirements Study (MCRS) conducted by the Air Force analyzed three case studies involving varying degrees of simultaneous contingency operations and homeland defense events. In two of these scenarios, air refueling requirements surpassed existing capacity, reaching up to 120 percent of the air refueling fleet's strength, or 567 tankers of all types.⁴²

Although resourceful maintainers and innovative tanker planners can mitigate deficiencies to some extent, marginal efficiencies cannot fully compensate for systemic under-resourcing. General Van Ovost, testifying on the sufficiency of the current air refueling fleet, expressed doubts to Congress in 2023, stating, "Credible air refueling capacity must simultaneously cover multiple high-priority global

³⁹ Greg L. Davis, "Operation Noble Eagle," 17 November 2001, <https://www.af.mil/>.

⁴⁰ Rachel S. Cohen and Stephen Losey, "US Air Force Fleet's Mission-Capable Rates Are Stagnating. Here's the Plan to Change That," *Air Force Times*, 14 February 2022, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>.

⁴¹ *PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China's Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces*, 3rd ed. (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2022), 10, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Dougherty, "Buying Time," 10.

⁴² Carl Lude and Jean Mahan, "Mobility Capabilities and Requirements Study 2016: Executive Summary" (United States Transportation Command), n.d., <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

demands, which causes daily and wartime concerns within the air refueling fleet . . . an inventory of 466 total aircraft [is] sufficient, but at elevated risk.”⁴³

Venturing into war with only 60 percent of a critically needed resource presents an undeniably elevated risk. In essence, the current investment falls short of aligning with the strategic value that Air Force tankers provide to the joint force, jeopardizing the ability to meet concurrent operational mission requirements.

To ensure the ability to employ long-range bombers in the Indo-Pacific while fulfilling joint force needs, the Air Force should prioritize enhancing its air refueling capacity and capabilities. It should advocate to Congress to lift the dual injunctions on retiring KC-135s and acquiring more KC-46s, thereby facilitating the revitalization of personnel, assets, and funding toward the newer and more capable KC-46. Congress has signaled receptiveness to a compelling argument by tasking the Air Force with justifying the business case for KC-135 recapitalization and outlining a clear road map for the NGAS tanker.⁴⁴

The Air Force should seize this opportunity and swiftly devise an accelerated plan, initially focusing on augmenting air refueling capacity (through increased KC-46 acquisition) and subsequently enhancing capabilities (expediting NGAS acquisition).⁴⁵ Leveraging the open KC-46 production line is crucial, as restarting similar lines—like those for the B-2, C-17, and F-22—would entail significant costs. If Congress deems 466 tankers the minimum necessary for global operations, it should direct the Air Force to bolster the force by 40 percent to 653 tankers to ensure readiness. Transitioning all tankers to KC-46s would require an additional 474 aircraft, amounting to approximately USD 89.6 billion. While a one-time procurement of this magnitude may be unlikely, the Air Force can gradually work toward this goal.

For instance, reallocating funds from less strategic investments, such as the refresh of “fourth-gen plus” F-15EXs, could substantially boost KC-46 procurement. Redirecting the USD 2.67 billion allocated for F-15EXs could nearly double the KC-46 procurement.⁴⁶ At USD 189 million per KC-46—or slightly

⁴³ General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, “2023 Posture Statement to House Armed Services Committee Joint Subcommittee on Posture and Readiness of the Mobility Enterprise,” 28 March 2023, 16, <https://www.ustranscom.mil/>.

⁴⁴ House, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024*, 118th Cong., 1st sess., 2023, H.R. 2670, sections 139.

⁴⁵ John A. Tirpak, “B-21: Shape of the Future,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 20 January 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

⁴⁶ Frank Gorenc, “The Case for the F-15EX Fighter Jet,” *Las Vegas Sun*, 27 March 2019, <https://lasvegassun.com/>; and Senate, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 Conference Report*, December 2023, Sec. 4001, 33 <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

less than the cost of two F-15EXs—the Air Force can continue to scale up its capabilities as it progresses toward the NGAS tanker.

Moreover, decisions and development for the NGAS tanker must accelerate to breakneck speed. This will entail making tough choices early in the process and implementing innovative acquisition strategies, such as decentralizing decision making and initiating early prototyping and testing, to expedite fielding times.⁴⁷ While these endeavors may not be straightforward or inexpensive, they represent crucial steps toward rejuvenating an air refueling fleet with the capacity and capabilities to provide crucial support for decision-makers, facilitating conventional long-range strikes as a deterrence while effectively meeting joint force requirements.

Nearly 30 years after Operation El Dorado Canyon, the United States conducted another mission in Libya, this time utilizing two B-2 stealth bombers. The mission proved to be tactically successful, neutralizing dozens of Islamic State fighters and decimating their training camps, thereby reaffirming America's readiness and capacity to execute lethal long-range strikes worldwide within hours.⁴⁸ The bombers, however, depended on the support of 15 KC-135s and KC-10s to complete their 34-hour round trip from Whiteman AFB, Missouri.⁴⁹ Few nations possess the capability to project such airpower globally. However, this capability is not assured, especially against adversaries equipped with significantly more robust A2/AD networks than Libya.

If the Air Force aims to uphold its commitment to providing “strategic deterrence, global strike, and combat support . . . anytime, anywhere,” it must possess a sufficiently resourced tanker fleet with the capacity and capability to facilitate long-range conventional strikes in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁰ Among various legitimate requirements, air refueling stands out as a critically underfunded capability that urgently requires reevaluation to align with strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific. As essential as they are, employing sophisticated long-range bombers without adequate tanker support to transport them, sustain them, and ensure their return poses significant challenges. ✪

⁴⁷ Jonathan P. Wong et al., *Improving Defense Acquisition: Insights from Three Decades of RAND Research* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2022), 30, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴⁸ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Dan Lamothe, “The U.S. Flew Stealth Bombers across the Globe to Strike ISIS Camps in Libya,” *Washington Post*, 19 January 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁴⁹ The author served as a planner during the strike and was able to inform part of the tanker plan. Thomas J. Doscher, “AF Refuelers Enable B-2 Strike against ISIL in Libya,” 18th Air Force Public Affairs, 20 January 2017, <https://www.af.mil/>.

⁵⁰ “AFGSC Mission,” Air Force Global Strike Command, 2024, <https://www.afgsc.af.mil/>.

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Echoes of War

Deciphering Chinese Military Strategy through the Lens of US Intelligence History

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Abstract

This article delves into the impact of Chinese military strategy during the Korean War and its interplay with US intelligence at the time. It posits that intelligence analysts must grasp Chinese military strategy as a cornerstone of their training to enhance their effectiveness in estimative, current, and warning intelligence for operational gains. Drawing from an array of authoritative primary and secondary sources, it seeks to illuminate instructive insights through a juxtaposition of Chinese strategic maneuvers and US intelligence efficacy. By joining select multiservice and multiagency experiences, this article propels the performance of the US intelligence community today, offering a yardstick to gauge contemporary advancements. Intelligence analysts and operational planning teams markedly enhance their achievements by drawing from historical precedents to decipher Chinese intentions and capabilities. Embracing this paradigm equips military operations to adeptly tackle the realistic tactical, operational, and strategic challenges confronting US forces.

From 25 June 1950 to 27 July 1953, South Korea and the United Nations (UN) waged the Korean War against the unprovoked aggression of North Korea, backed by China and the Soviet Union. Initially, the comparatively weaker South, with 65,000 combat troops, yielded to the quantitatively and qualitatively superior North, boasting 135,000 combat troops.¹ The early stages witnessed North Korea drive South Korean forces perilously close to the ocean near Pusan in the south. To reverse this initial onslaught, the UN intervened in August, pushing North Korean forces back to the Yalu River on the Chinese border. However, UN forces encountered a formidable challenge with the commencement of five Chinese military campaigns in October 1950, compelling them southward near the 38th parallel. The subsequent two years of conflict resulted in a protracted stalemate, culminating in the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement by the United States, North Korea, and China. While

¹ Roy Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1961), <https://history.army.mil/>.

this accord brought about a semblance of peace to the peninsula, it set the stage for what remains officially the longest-running war in modern history.

Presently, circumstances pertaining to peaceful reunification on the peninsula arguably stand at their most precarious juncture. Kim Jong-un, the unchallenged leader of the world's most profoundly totalitarian state, has officially inaugurated a new approach toward North–South unification policy. This approach views South Korea merely as another adversarial state lacking exceptional ties to the North, declaring that “we should no longer make to regard the clan [South Korea] . . . as the partner of reconciliation and reunification,” according to the official newspaper of the Central Workers Party of Korea.² Concurrently, the frequency and intensity of missile tests escalates, enhancing North Korea's military capabilities, while diplomatic normalization serves as a smokescreen for potential surprise provocations.

Against a backdrop of geopolitical distractions such as the focus on Israel and Ukraine within the UN, North Korea may perceive an opportunity to leverage military actions to extract concessions on sanctions. Moreover, proponents of the prevailing international order must contemplate the prospect of China, bound by a defense treaty with North Korea, seizing an opportunity to collaborate in a Taiwan contingency, aligned with their respective objectives.

This piece endeavors to illuminate the Chinese Communist Party's involvement in the Korean War, its enduring impact on contemporary international relations, and offers a comprehensive assessment of US intelligence efforts during that era to extract insights applicable to modern intelligence operations. Ultimately, intelligence analysts must grasp the essentials of Chinese military strategy to enhance their proficiency in estimative, current, and warning intelligence.

The onset of the war was instigated by North Korea under the leadership of Kim Il-sung, who sought to assert control over the Korean peninsula through coercive means, deeming the political landscape unfavorable for unification via subversive tactics. Orchestrated by the North, Communist party adherents in South Korea initiated an armed insurrection between 1948 and 1949 in a bid to thwart the establishment of a stable, autonomous government beyond northern influence.³ However, this endeavor faltered following concerted efforts to undermine Communist propaganda and a robust counterinsurgency campaign by South Korean forces, which disrupted insurgent supply lines, sustenance, and refuge.

² “Report on the 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee,” *Rodong Sinmun*, December 2023, <http://www.rodong.rep.kp/>.

³ Byong-Moo Hwang, “Revolutionary Armed Struggle and the Origins of the Korean War,” *Asian Perspectives* 12, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 1998), 131–34, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

These developments effectively quashed subversive endeavors to alter the internal dynamics of South Korean politics, prompting North Korea to seek assistance from the Soviet Union and China. While Kim Il-sung played a pivotal role in strategic decision-making concerning Communist forces on the peninsula, heavy reliance on Soviet and Chinese leaders both militarily and ideologically significantly influenced future actions.

Following the green light for invasion, Kim intensified preparations for war. Employing meticulous operational security measures, the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) launched a surprise invasion on 25 June 1950, catching the South off guard. However, initial success proved fleeting, as their strategy to swiftly overpower the South Korean military before potential US intervention failed to materialize. Following a thorough examination of the first six months of war in December 1950, North Korean military strategists concluded that Soviet mechanization doctrine, upon which they had modeled their tactics, was ill-suited for their predominantly infantry-centric configuration.⁴ Presently, we observe a more cohesive and integrated strategy under a refined military doctrine.

Soviet Union involvement, under the leadership of Josef Stalin, primarily revolved around logistical support and training, although there were some instances of direct engagement with US forces in the aerial theater. Initially, the Soviets rebuffed Kim Il-sung's entreaties for backing an invasion without explicit endorsement from China. However, upon confirmation of Chinese support through troop reinforcements, Soviet aid in terms of supplies and military personnel was mobilized to facilitate necessary preparations. Soviet military advisors traveled to Pyongyang to assist in formulating initial invasion plans.

MiG fighter jets were deployed to Andong airbase in China, situated just beyond the Yalu River, where they played a crucial role in training Chinese pilots and safeguarding Communist logistics against potential US aerial assaults. In the defense of these vital installations, Soviet pilots bore the brunt of aerial engagements in the infamous "MiG Alley," located southwest of Andong airbase. The death of Stalin in March 1953 marked the end of the original, albeit limited, support provided by the Soviet Union to its allies.

Regarding the Chinese, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, their involvement was driven by a multitude of factors. Foremost among these was the imperative to defend territorial integrity against perceived imperialist threats, particularly given the proximity of their Manchurian border. The historical precedent of Japanese military incursions launched from the Korean peninsula underscored the strategic

⁴ James M. Minnich, *The North Korean People's Army: Origins and Current Tactics* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

importance of controlling this pivotal landmass as a buffer against potential aggressors.

In addition to these overt geopolitical considerations, China's decision to enter the conflict was motivated by less apparent yet equally compelling factors. The Communist Party leadership harbored aspirations for bolstering national esteem, enhancing international standing, and fulfilling social obligations to assert its position among the foremost Socialist states. Moreover, Mao sought to consolidate CCP authority over the domestic populace by rallying them against an external adversary, a tactic previously employed with success during the Japanese occupation just five years prior. Furthermore, China's narrative of reclaiming its historical status as Asia's "Middle Kingdom" also factored into its decision to engage in war. Considering these multifaceted motivations, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership tasked Commander Peng Duhai with devising a military strategy aimed at realizing its broader political objectives.

Chinese Ends

The evolution of battlefield dynamics across three years and two distinct phases of conflict profoundly influenced Chinese strategy. The Chinese chose a strategy of annihilation in the first phase, which saw UN forces swiftly pushed southward from the Yalu, crossing the 38th parallel in a mere month.⁵ Despite deploying a quarter million troops in this campaign to halt the UN advance, Chinese forces achieved only moderate success in their first three offensives. Concurrently, they struggled with weak rear-area defense, stretched logistical supply lines, and suffered significant casualties, estimated at around 110,000.

The fourth and fifth offensives marked a stark departure, proving futile as the Chinese failed to drive the UN forces further south or mount effective counterattacks, resulting in the loss of an additional 185,000 troops. This heralded the onset of the two-year second phase of the conflict, during which the Chinese shifted to a strategy of attrition, aimed at accumulating strength for future massed assaults. However, UN victories that pushed Chinese forces northward effectively dashed these ambitions. Compounding factors such as economic stagnation, marginal gains on the battlefield, and the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953, provided China with the political maneuverability to extricate itself from the conflict.

⁵ Markus B. Liegl, *China's Use of Military Force in Foreign Affairs: The Dragon Strikes* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Chinese Ways

The prevailing doctrine at the time, which had proven efficacious for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during the Chinese Civil War, was conceptually referred to as *people's war*. Characterized by its asymmetric nature, *people's war* emphasized leveraging supremely advantageous disparities in manpower ratios to offset the technological and material superiority of an adversary.⁶ Central to this doctrine were the core principles of employing infantry forces and mobility, which included: initiating the offensive, capitalizing on surprise, dispersing during defensive maneuvers, employing deception, minimizing logistical dependence through self-sufficiency, and inflicting attrition on the adversary by mobilizing the surrounding populace.

Of particular significance was the deceptive tactic of enticing the enemy deep into one's territory, effectively trading land for time, as this provided fertile ground for the application of people's war principles. Although the interpretation of this doctrine has evolved over time, it persisted in its fundamental form until the mid-1980s.

Chinese Means

To achieve its military objectives, the Chinese augmented their initial force of 250,000 troops to 700,000 by August 1950, albeit with a relatively limited presence of artillery, mechanized units, or aircraft for direct support. Each Corps of troops at the outset of the conflict comprised four armies, three artillery divisions, and three air-defense corps, predominantly nonmotorized and encountering challenges in maneuvering against the more mobile UN forces.⁷ Chinese troops relied heavily on what they could carry, granting them mobility and elusiveness on the battlefield. Artillery assets were scarce, with only one supporting division, while tank regiments, comprising roughly 90 tanks each, numbered a mere five, maintaining this structure throughout the war with fluctuations in troop numbers dictated by attrition rates.

Initially, the air forces were modest, with approximately 80–100 fighters, until the arrival of 124 MiG-15s from the Soviet Union nearly a year into the conflict. However, the Chinese initially faced setbacks as Stalin withheld promised air support during offensive campaigns, opting to preserve his nation's aircraft for the defense of Manchuria.

⁶ Christopher P. Twomey, *The Military Lens: Doctrinal Difference and Deterrence Failure in Sino-American Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁷ Liegl, *China's Use of Military Force in Foreign Affairs*.

Chinese Legacy of the Korean War

Chinese political objectives were partially achieved, enabling the CCP to enhance its standing as a leader within the burgeoning Socialist sphere by effectively confronting imperialist forces and supporting fellow Socialist allies. Additionally, the CCP consolidated its authority over China by fostering a common external adversary, a tactic still employed today to galvanize nationalist sentiment in alignment with its agenda. Furthermore, the pursuit of nuclear armament assumed heightened urgency in the aftermath of the war. Mao's apprehensions regarding the Soviet Union and the specter of nuclear threats from the United States catalyzed a shift toward nuclear deterrence as a supplement to conventional forces.⁸ Leveraging apprehensions surrounding this strategic asymmetry, the CCP embarked on a trajectory that culminated in the testing of its inaugural nuclear bomb eleven years postwar, alongside the development of indigenous satellite technology and the production of ballistic missiles.

The CCP's failure to expel Western forces from the Korean peninsula has left lasting repercussions, shaping dynamics that persist to this day. Beijing must now grapple with the fact that North Korea's actions have strengthened the relationship between its major rivals, South Korea and Japan. This was evidenced by their first-ever stand-alone summit in 2023, which is detrimental to China's interests.⁹

Chinese support for North Korea inadvertently justifies the continued presence of US troops on the peninsula—a reality that contrasts with previous US attempts to withdraw before the onset of the Cold War. Ironically, China perceives regional tensions as stemming from the presence of US forces in South Korea, viewing them as an “existential threat” to their de facto buffer zone in North Korea and hindrance to the peninsula's ultimate reunification under a regime amenable to China.¹⁰

Adding to global concerns is the unresolved tension surrounding Taiwan. Secretary of State Dean Acheson's omission of Korea and Taiwan from the post–World War II US defense perimeter in his 1950 Press Club speech presented a perceived opportunity for Beijing to advance China's aim of incorporating Taiwan under CCP control. Mao's endorsement of a North Korean offensive had ripple effects, prompting the Truman administration to dispatch forces to safeguard Taiwan,

⁸ Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996–1997), 59, <https://fsi9-prod.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/>.

⁹ “The Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David” (fact sheet, The White House, 18 August 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>).

¹⁰ Hao Yufan, “China and the Korean Peninsula: A Chinese View,” *Far Eastern Survey* 27, no. 8 (1958), 862–84, <https://doi.org/>.

effectively thwarting a potential Chinese military resolution to the Taiwan issue.¹¹ While Mao is not publicly blamed within China for the loss of Taiwan to the Nationalists, a compelling argument posits that his strategic decision to support North Korea precluded Taiwan's unification with the mainland.

UN Intelligence During the Korean War

The Korean War yielded three pivotal themes from which intelligence analysts can extract valuable insights for future intelligence operations: strategic surprise, signals intelligence (SIGINT), and human intelligence (HUMINT).

Strategic Surprise

The first theme, perhaps the most enduringly etched in memory, revolves around the failure of the US defense apparatus to anticipate not one, but two surprise invasions on the Korean peninsula. Much discourse has scrutinized the causes behind this lapse, ranging from strategic leaders dismissing intelligence too readily to the absence of definitive and actionable intelligence. However, the reality is far more intricate, likely stemming from a confluence of factors spanning the tactical, operational, and strategic echelons of warfare. Here, we shall focus on key evidentiary elements furnished by the intelligence community to senior leadership both in Washington and the Korean Theater of Operations (KTO).

The intelligence gathered, in terms of both quality and quantity, provided sufficient grounds for analysts to forewarn senior political and military figures. The array of information sources encompassed espionage, photo reconnaissance, communications intelligence (COMINT), captured and translated enemy document exploitation (DOMEX), prisoner interrogations, open-source broadcasts, newspapers, indigenous populations, Westerners residing on the Chinese mainland, military attaché and consular reports from Taiwan and Hong Kong, nationalist factions, and intelligence agencies affiliated with the UN coalition.¹² Notably absent were high-altitude imagery sources, as both the U-2 and CORONA satellite initiatives took flight only in 1956 and 1959, respectively.¹³

These diverse sources underpinned the analytical process for daily intelligence briefs as well as national intelligence assessments, supported by civilian and military

¹¹ Harry S. Truman, "Statement by the President on the Situation in Korea" (statement, The White House, 27 June 1950), <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/>.

¹² Eliot A. Cohen, "Only Half the Battle': American Intelligence and the Chinese Intervention in Korea, 1950," *Intelligence and National Security* 5, no. 1 (1990): 129–49, <https://doi.org/>.

¹³ Kenneth E. Greer, "Corona," *Studies in Intelligence* Supplement, 17 (Spring 1973): 1–37, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/>.

intelligence entities. A daily intelligence report from 3 October 1950, referenced a document from the United Kingdom Foreign Office revealing that Chinese Communist Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai had informed the Indian ambassador in Peiping (now Beijing) of Chinese intentions to intervene across the Yalu River to defend North Korea.¹⁴ This assertion found further corroboration in a report three days later, on 6 October, when the Indian prime minister, acting as a conduit between Communist and American interests, expressed apprehensions regarding the inevitable onset of war based on his assessment of the prevailing situation.¹⁵

The culmination of gathered intelligence subsequently informed significant publications aimed at both theater and national audiences, most notably the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). A comprehensive review of NIEs spanning from 8 September 1950 to 24 November 1950, reveals a prevailing conviction among intelligence analysts that Communist Chinese forces possessed the requisite capability to effectively impede the advancement of UN forces toward the Yalu River, potentially even compelling their retreat to defensive positions farther south. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) underscored this assessment, estimating that 30–40 thousand “Manchurian volunteers” were already deployed in North Korea, with hundreds of thousands more stationed just over the Chinese border.¹⁶ However, what remained elusive to the CIA was a definitive understanding of the Communist intentions behind deploying these forces. Analysts conjectured that the Chinese were disinclined to instigate a global conflict by directly attacking UN forces, instead preferring to clandestinely bolster North Korean capabilities through the deployment of sizable “volunteer” contingents. This analytical perspective was further substantiated by key assumptions regarding Chinese reluctance to seize multiple previous strategic opportunities to deploy troops at pivotal junctures when North Korean forces were at their zenith, notably during the defense of Busan, the UN amphibious landing at Inchon, and the subsequent crossing of the 38th Parallel by UN forces.

More specifically, an NIE on 12 October 1950 laid out the rationales both for and against potential intervention. Addressed to Pres. Harry Truman, this document indicated consensus among the CIA, Air Force, Navy, Army, and Department of State regarding the Chinese capacity for intervention, yet hesitancy prevailed

¹⁴ Erin E. Thompson, “China Threatens Intervention in Korean War (3 OCT 1950),” *This Week in MI History*, 2 October 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

¹⁵ Robert Barnes, “Between the Blocs: India, the United Nations, and Ending the Korean War,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 263–86, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

¹⁶ Jonathan Corrado, “Rethinking Intelligence Failure: China’s Intervention in the Korean War,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 36, no. 1 (2023): 199–219, <https://doi.org/>.

regarding the likelihood of a full-scale incursion into Korea.¹⁷ The arguments in favor of intervention encompassed various strategic considerations: bolstering Communist China's prestige, enhancing its standing among global Communist adherents, eliminating a Western-style democracy on its borders, safeguarding sources of electrical power for the Manchurian region, deflecting blame onto Western powers for domestic economic challenges, and countering perceived ideological setbacks should Western forces prevail in Korea. Conversely, arguments against intervention included concerns over domestic stability and economic vulnerabilities that could precipitate the downfall of the Communist regime, diminishing prospects for Chinese accession to the UN, reliance on Soviet assistance by the CCP, the belief that opportune moments for intervention had elapsed, and the assertion that covert aid would represent a more cost-effective means of achieving CCP objectives.

This analysis of competing hypotheses demonstrated thoroughness and generally mirrored Communist calculations. However, it appeared to place less emphasis on the sociological factors influencing Communist strategic leadership and leaned more toward a cold realist approach to decision making.

It is imperative to recognize that the adversary retains agency in any conflict. The Chinese Communists demonstrated a steadfast commitment to operational security and deceptive practices to obfuscate indications of their significant intervention. UN intelligence partially discerned a substantial buildup of Communist forces along the Manchuria–North Korea border. When in proximity to or crossing the border, commanders meticulously enforced camouflage measures for troops during daylight hours to evade aerial surveillance, permitting troop movement only under the cover of darkness. This strategy drew from the Communists' experiences in the Chinese Civil War, where camouflage and deception played pivotal roles in countering a predominantly mechanized Chinese nationalist adversary and, subsequently, the US military.

To obscure visual detection of force buildup, Chinese forces employed dispersal and deception tactics. Local materials such as dirt and foliage were utilized to conceal structures and defensive positions. Transport vehicles were disguised with natural foliage and strategically positioned adjacent to hedgerows to mask their presence from photo reconnaissance.¹⁸ Complementing visual deception, the Chinese endeavored to minimize their electronic signal footprint. Their forces

¹⁷ Analysis of Intelligence at the Outbreak of the Korean War and Chinese Intervention (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, 30 April 1951), <https://www.cia.gov/>.

¹⁸ "Communist Camouflage and Deception," *Air University Quarterly Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1953): 90–101, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

predominantly relied on landlines rather than the mobile radios typical of fully mechanized armies, owing to their reliance on Soviet provisions or acquisition from battling Nationalist forces in previous years. While this limited their ability to swiftly coordinate with frontline units, it mitigated the risk of detectable signatures that could alert US forces to their presence. Furthermore, encoded messages were transmitted at predetermined times and frequencies, with explicit instructions for recipients not to acknowledge receipt, thereby minimizing evidence of their operational activities.¹⁹

SIGINT

The organizational structure of the contemporary US SIGINT community owes much of its evolution to the challenges encountered during the Korean War era. Following World War II, significant reductions in manpower and resources occurred across the security landscape. Despite the establishment of key entities such as the United States Air Force, the CIA, the National Security Council, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947, intelligence components within these organizations received minimal resource allocation, leading to disruptions in their operational capacities. SIGINT was no exception, as numerous personnel, equipment, and organizational capabilities were downsized.

Concurrent with North Korea's invasion, the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA) emerged as the principal entity responsible for military SIGINT. Established in July 1949 with the objective of enhancing US cryptography, AFSA sought to streamline efforts and enhance efficiency across the military SIGINT community by consolidating the processing of SIGINT data from the Army Security Agency (ASA), United States Air Force Security Service (USAFSS), and Naval Security Group (NSG).

In 1952, President Truman commissioned the Brownell Committee to conduct an analysis aimed at identifying improvements to the underperforming SIGINT apparatus. The committee's investigation revealed significant shortcomings in AFSA's strategic efficacy, citing its limited legal authority over collection assets, which resulted in siloed reporting.²⁰ Consequently, the administration oversaw the dissolution of AFSA and the establishment of the National Security Agency (NSA) in 1952.

¹⁹ Matthew M. Aid, "American COMINT in the Korean War (Part II): From the Chinese Intervention to the Armistice," *Intelligence and National Security* 15, no. 1 (2000), 16, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁰ David A. Hatch and Robert Louis Benson, "The Korean War: The SIGINT Background," *United States Cryptologic History* 5, no. 3 (2000): 1–17, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

During its brief tenure, AFSA made notable strides in the collection and dissemination of intelligence, particularly in the realm of communications intelligence (COMINT, comprising data intelligible in human language rather than mere numbers and sounds). However, at the onset of the conflict, COMINT resources were ill-equipped to decipher daily Chinese activities. It was not until December 1950 that the theater saw a nominal presence of Chinese linguists, with recruitment efforts to address this shortfall proving inadequate until June 1951, likely due to the primary focus on North Korea and the perceived urgency of Soviet military involvement.

Moreover, the SIGINT community faced significant challenges with the scarcity of collection facilities within the Korean peninsula itself. Initially, US SIGINT operations circumvented this limitation by leveraging resources from the British Government Communications Headquarters, based in Hong Kong, and collaborating with Chinese Nationalist forces in the region.²¹ Prior to Chinese intervention, both entities furnished valuable insights into large-scale troop movements from southern to northern China, indicative of force buildup along the North Korean border. Additionally, a wealth of reliable data emanated from intercepted civil communications within Communist China, shedding light on various facets such as the economic landscape (evidenced by civil society demonstrations), military deployments (evident from immunization initiatives), and logistical activities (observed through reports of jammed rail stations) pertaining to the PLA.²²

During the clandestine PLA maneuver across the Yalu River in mid-October 1950, scant SIGINT indicators hinted at the occurrence of this event. The PLA predominantly comprised infantry units operating under stringent radio silence protocols. With limited radio equipment at their disposal, communication relied primarily on hand-delivered messages or encoded broadcasts at predetermined times and frequencies.²³ These deliberate measures virtually ensured tactical surprise, notably evidenced by the lack of organic SIGINT support for the 1st US Marines stationed near the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. Consequently, they remained unaware of the imminent threat posed by a massive influx of Chinese troops, comprising approximately thirty divisions, on 26 November 1950.

US Army units employed low-level voice intercept (LLVI) capabilities near static front lines, beginning in the summer of 1951. These units monitored Chinese telephone conversations by exploiting ground-wave emissions transmitted through

²¹ Aid, "American COMINT in the Korean War," 16.

²² Guy R. Vernderpool, "COMINT and the PRC Intervention in the Korean War," *Cryptologic Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 1–26, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

²³ Aid, "American COMINT in the Korean War," 14.

telephone wires. However, this form of intelligence gathering posed considerable risks, as intelligence collection personnel had to be close to enemy encampments to intercept emissions of sufficient strength. Subsequently, this intelligence was swiftly relayed to provide timely warnings regarding the timing, location, and magnitude of impending Chinese attacks. Throughout the remainder of the conflict, UN troops effectively utilized this technique to bolster defenses against Communist offensives at strategic locations such as Triangle Hill (Hill 395), Old Baldy (Hill 266), and Pork Chop Hill (Hill 255).

The US Air Force and South Korean intelligence achieved notable successes through the interception of Chinese Air Force communications. USAFSS operations were predominantly situated at the Tactical Air Control Center in Seoul, facilitating seamless communication between SIGINT collectors and air controllers. This operational setup ensured swift intelligence dissemination as soon as information could be processed.

In a specific instance, orders from the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) headquarters in Beijing to its 5th Air Division in Manchuria were intercepted by USAFSS COMINT Detachment 13. Following translation, the USAFSS promptly alerted American fighter aircraft to the potential presence of Chinese aircraft. The subsequent day, a formation comprising eight IL-10 bombers alongside Yak-9 and MiG-15 fighters encountered American P-51 and F-86 fighters, which were scrambled to the area based on intelligence intercepts. This timely response effectively disrupted a Chinese operation near Sinuiju.²⁴

HUMINT

At the outset of the war, the United States possessed limited HUMINT (intelligence derived from human sources such as interrogation, source operations, and debriefings) capabilities focused on North Korean or Chinese activities, as most assets were directed toward monitoring Soviet activities in the Far East. The US Army had established the Korean Liaison Office (KLO) shortly before the war to gather intelligence on North Korea, while the US Air Force maintained a small Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) with a handful of native South Korean linguists. Additionally, the CIA had a presence in the region. However, these disparate military services and civilian agencies did not coordinate their resources centrally to minimize redundancy, as each organization pursued its own internal taskings.

²⁴ Aid, "American COMINT in the Korean War," 29.

Although not fully appreciated by senior military leadership at the time, information gleaned from multiple interrogations of captured Chinese soldiers in early November 1950 provided incontrovertible evidence of Chinese intervention.²⁵ However, attempts later in the war to centralize control over special operations and certain HUMINT efforts, such as the establishment of the Combined Command Reconnaissance Activities–Korea (CCRAK), faltered primarily due to the lack of administrative or operational authority over field units.²⁶

Throughout the conflict, deficiencies in collection assets and essential language expertise were mitigated by recruiting native Koreans sympathetic to the South Korean cause. Many of these recruits underwent brief training to infiltrate enemy lines, gathering crucial information on capabilities, troop positions, and intentions to strike. Two major operations orchestrated by the US Army were Operation Aviary and Operation Salamander.²⁷

Although the CIA was the first to deploy Korean recruits behind enemy lines at the war's onset, Operation Aviary entailed air-dropping trained agents short distances ahead of UN battle lines. However, this airborne operation proved largely unsuccessful due to many agents' lack of long-range radio capabilities to relay information effectively and the persistent risks of detection. Conversely, Operation Salamander achieved somewhat greater success, with agents inserted along the west and east coasts of the Korean peninsula. Amphibious insertion methods offered safer means for agents and provided multiple escape routes. By the summer of 1951, improvements in communication, facilitated by continuous wave radios, enabled agents to transmit data to UN listening posts. Nevertheless, recruit losses remained substantial, ultimately diminishing the impact of tactical intelligence gleaned from a HUMINT perspective on enemy troop movements.

Conclusion

In assessing US intelligence performance during this conflict, the organizations tasked with preventing strategic surprises fell short. However, when examining tactical intelligence matters, numerous successes emerged, contributing to timely warnings of impending PLA attacks. Nonetheless, resource allocation to achieve these results lagged at the outbreak of the war. From this broad analysis, three lessons emerge.

²⁵ Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*, 8–12.

²⁶ Steven Kuni and Kenneth Finlayson, "Catch as Catch Can: Special Forces and Line Crossers in the Korean War," *Veritas* 2, no. 2 (2006): 26–32, <https://arsof-history.org/>.

²⁷ John P. Finnegan, "The Evolution of US Army HUMINT: Intelligence Operations in the Korean War," *Studies in Intelligence* 5, no. 2 (2002), 57–70, <https://www.nasaa-home.org/>.

Firstly, historical evidence demonstrates recurring instances of significant military surprises approximately every decade since the 1930s. Examples include the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the North Korean and Chinese Communist invasions of 1950, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, the Beirut barracks bombing in 1983, the fall of the Soviet Union and its threat to the United States in 1991, the al-Qaeda terrorist attack on 9/11 in 2001, the meteoric rise of the Islamic State in 2014, the first invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2014, and most recently, Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel in 2023. Analysts should recognize this pattern and incorporate it into their strategic warning frameworks. Practically, analysts and strategic thinkers should develop hypotheses with a keen awareness of this historical context. Surprises, in many respects, should not be entirely unexpected.

Secondly, employing contemporary structured thinking techniques such as alternative futures hypothesis generation, high impact/low probability analysis, and intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) offer valuable starting points for assessing Chinese military thought. When crafting courses of action, US analysts must prioritize understanding how the Chinese perceive and intend to conduct warfare, typically elucidated in doctrinal concepts of strategy. Grasping the "ways" in modern strategic thinking is challenging but leveraging fundamental and authoritative Chinese-source documents from institutions like China's Academy of Military Science—including works such as the *Science of Military Strategy or Science of Campaigns*, defense white papers, five-year plan documents, and various official PLA statements—can facilitate this endeavor. While these documents provide a general framework rather than precise prescriptions for force employment, they furnish sufficient specificity to support analytic conclusions with heightened confidence. Notably, such published materials were unavailable to analysts during the Korean War, who had to rely on historical documentation detailing Communist strategies from the Chinese Civil War.

Moreover, the process of developing Chinese military strategy since the ascension of the CCP to power is primarily influenced by political leadership perceptions, rather than solely by military generals. This signifies that top political figures not only determine the objectives (ends) but also play a significant role in shaping the approaches (ways) and resource allocation (means). This contrasts with the US military's approach to strategy; wherein political leaders often delegate substantial autonomy to the Department of Defense in devising strategies through the national defense authorization process.²⁸

²⁸ Timothy R. Heath, Timothy "Why PLA Watchers Keep Missing Changes to China's Military Strategy," *American Intelligence Journal* 27, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 67–75, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

Furthermore, cultural disparities between Eastern and Western perspectives influence the formulation of strategy. Eastern paradigms typically prioritize relational dynamics, as evidenced by concepts such as Chain Reaction Warfare (potential for one conflict to cause another). Western approaches tend to emphasize categorization, exemplified by tools like the acronym DIME (diplomatic, information, military, and economic).²⁹ Seminal texts that shape Chinese military strategy, such as the *Art of War*, underscore this relational perspective, offering invaluable cultural insights essential for deriving intelligence analyses.

Thirdly, the effectiveness of a nation's intelligence apparatus hinges on institutional prioritization. Intelligence achieves its maximum effectiveness only when ample time and resources are allocated to the organizations tasked with providing decision advantages to policy makers and operatives. The challenges inherent in uncovering and disseminating information intentionally concealed by China necessitate careful consideration by intelligence consumers. The PLA's success in executing surprise attacks was partly due to a lack of information sources readily available to intelligence analysts, particularly after post-World War II cutbacks led to the depletion of linguistic teams proficient in Mandarin and Korean. Essential components such as passive SIGINT collection towers, specialized HUMINT assets tailored to the era's requirements, and a cadre of all-source analysts with deep expertise on China were notably absent.

The intelligence community of that era grappled with its own set of challenges, including poor interagency coordination and human resource deficiencies. These issues hindered intelligence efforts from being timely, coherent, and pertinent to operational users. As noted earlier, the US Air Force established its own interrogation teams in 1949 under the Office of Special Investigations, a HUMINT mission better suited for the Army's KLO or CIA assets. Whether this stemmed from resource limitations or bureaucratic control issues remains uncertain, but the failure to synchronize collection efforts and disseminate information through centralized analysis channels, instead of fragmented stovepipes, diminished the capacity to develop a comprehensive threat assessment. Even if these tactical issues were addressed, the strained relationship between GEN Douglas MacArthur and intelligence persisted at the operational level. CIA analysts faced obstacles such as denial of access to facilities and theater reporting from the Far East Command headquarters in Japan, which served as the primary source of intelligence flowing

²⁹ Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?* (Washington: Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, June 2020), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>; and Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

to Washington from the various services.³⁰ These challenges, coupled with less prominent systemic issues, constituted significant friction points in the lead-up to the impending North Korean invasion.

At the strategic coordination level, intelligence faced challenges in harmonizing efforts among the various military services and the CIA. In 1949, Congress recognized its oversight responsibilities amidst the Cold War transition, leading to the publication of the Dulles-Jackson-Correa Report. This report highlighted overlapping responsibilities and rampant duplicative efforts within intelligence entities. It specifically noted that the CIA “has not as yet adequately exercised its function to coordinate these and other estimates . . . [and] arrangements are lacking for regularly ensuring that assumptions are comparable, analytical methods valid, and the final estimates as sound as possible.”³¹ However, the report’s recommendations were not acted upon until six months into the war, when the Office of National Estimates (ONE) was formed at the CIA under the leadership of Director of Central Intelligence Walter Smith.

Ultimately, the Chinese military strategy employed during the Korean War continues to shape the modern geopolitical landscape, necessitating attention from various political and military stakeholders now and continually. While intelligence remains a crucial tool, the defense community must consistently uphold the hard-earned lessons from the war to effectively counter Chinese strategy. Failure to do so could leave them vulnerable to the PLA’s maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific region. 🌐

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³⁰ Clayton Laurie, “The Korean War and the Central Intelligence Agency,” Central Intelligence Agency, 1 May 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/>.

³¹ “Report, the Central Intelligence Agency and National Organization for Intelligence, by Chairman Allen W. Dulles, William H. Jackson, and Mathias F. Correa,” National Security Archive, 1 January 1949, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/>. The Dulles-Jackson-Correa Report, also referred to as the Intelligence Survey Group (ISG) or the Dulles Report, was commissioned following a National Security Council decision to assess the structure, operations, and personnel of the Central Intelligence Agency. Chaired by Allen Dulles, the committee comprised Mathias F. Correa and William H. Jackson. In its assessment, the Dulles survey group criticized the CIA for its failure to effectively fulfill its coordinating functions, to meet its designated obligations in producing national intelligence, and for inadequately managing both its internal affairs and its inter-departmental responsibilities. While the report did not propose amendments to existing legislation, it emphasized the need for improved collaboration between the CIA and the Secretaries of State and Defense.

Fear and Anxiety of China's Rise

Understanding Response of the Indo-Pacific

SHAHADAT HOSSAIN

Abstract

The emotional turn in geopolitical decision is often overlooked in academia. However, emotions have had a significant impact on the major geopolitical events. In the current geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, some democratic nations, including the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, harbor fear of China's rise. China's economic growth, military expansion, and offensive foreign policy instilled fear in the Indo-Pacific region. In the fear of China, Indo-Pacific geopolitics is reshaping. When the new dynamics of the Indo-Pacific are counter to China fear, it is important to explore why China's rise is a matter of fear and anxiety to some nations in the Indo-Pacific. This article uniquely discusses how emotion can unify nations and contribute to establishing new a global order. Without knowing the emotional turn of the geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, our comprehension of the new landscape remains incomplete. This article aims to explore and understand the impact of emotions on the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

Emotion often goes overlooked in discussions of international relations, yet it exerts a significant influence on geopolitical events, political dynamics, and decision-making processes. Sometimes, emotions supersede rationality, ultimately shaping foreign policy and decisions.

The use of emotional terms in international relations can drastically impact a state's policy orientation. For instance, phrases like "the barbarians are coming" have been used to justify stringent Western migration policies. Similarly, emotions such as the desire for independence have historically fueled fights for autonomy in the developing world during the colonial period.

Fear emerges as a pivotal emotion in influencing international political dynamics. The expansion of the Soviet Union in Asia and Europe, coupled with its socialist economic ideology, instilled fear among capitalist nations. In the contemporary global geopolitical landscape, fear and anxiety surrounding China's rise significantly shape global realities and responses, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

This article delves into how fear and anxiety regarding China impact the geopolitical landscape, undertaking a literature review on emotions in international relations and providing theoretical explanations of their operation within this realm. It explores emotions' historical and cultural contexts, illustrating their influence on the international political landscape.

Furthermore, the article investigates the reasons behind China's status as a nation evoking fear and anxiety, examining political, economic, military, and ideological changes within China. It aims to elucidate why other nations perceive and react to this fear and anxiety, scrutinizing specific sectors within China that trigger apprehension in other nations and identifying which nations harbor such apprehensions and explaining their responses to China considering their fears.

Thus, the article underscores the importance of emotions in understanding the dynamics of international relations, particularly by elucidating the fear and anxiety surrounding China and its impact on geopolitics.

Literature Review

Russian researcher Gleb V. Kotsur posited that emotion in international relations transcends mere biological sensation, encompassing social, cultural, and historical dimensions.¹ Kotsur drew upon Simon Koschut's concept of *emotional culture*, comprising emotional codes and cultural scripts. *Emotional codes* represent expressions of emotion, while cultural scripts denote accepted verbal representations of emotions within a society.²

Koschut highlighted the symbiotic relationship between language and emotion, elucidating their role in power dynamics within international relations. He demonstrated how the United States and Europe leverage *fear* as a tool to address migration influxes.³

Koschut argued that emotional discourse shapes social action, asserting that emotions and discourse are intertwined within power dynamics. He contended that emotions, far from being irrational forces, exhibit patterns aligned with social relations. He further elucidated that emotions extend beyond rationality, challenging or spotlighting authorities' actions. He emphasized that emotions are not solely individual experiences but are socially recognized and engaged with on a broader scale, constituting the experience or belief of a social group.⁴

Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker illustrated the interconnectedness of emotion, discourse, and power. They argued that emotions, far from being solely individual experiences, are socially constructed and wield significant influence in political contexts. They examined how the emotional discourse of "good versus evil"

¹ Gleb V. Kotsur, "Emotions and International Relations," *Russian Journal of World Politics and Law of Nations* 1, no. 1–2 (2022), 204–06, <https://doi.org/>.

² Kotsur, "Emotions and International Relations," 212.

³ Simon Koschut, "Emotion, Discourse, and Power in World Politics," in *The Power of Emotions in World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴ Koschut, "Emotion, Discourse, and Power in World Politics," 4–6.

justifies the “war on terror,” institutionalizing emotions like sympathy, victimhood, and anger within political discourses.⁵

Chinese scholar Shiping Tang delineated two fundamental positions on coping with fear in international relations: offensive realism and non-offensive realism. According to Tang, *offensive realism* advocates for states to adopt a pessimistic view of others’ intentions, asserting that the anarchic nature of the international system prompts states to behave aggressively. According to this theory, it is logical for states to foster a mindset that assumes the worst about others’ intentions. In contrast, *non-offensive realism* takes a different stance, rejecting the notion of assuming the worst about others’ intentions. It argues that states can and should implement measures to reduce uncertainty surrounding each other’s intentions and mitigate fear. Non-offensive realism emphasizes the importance of managing fear regarding others’ intentions, contending that assuming the worst is not only irrational and counterproductive but also unsustainable. According to this perspective, states may even entertain a more dire scenario than what others intend out of fear.⁶

Muqtedar Khan and Isa Haskologlu elucidated fear’s impact on ancient state structures, realist state structures, and contemporary liberal theories of international relations, influencing state actions. They highlighted how fear, post-2001 and the war on terror, has shaped not only US foreign policy but also the agendas of other nations and international organizations, noting the worrisome trend of states weaponizing fear to achieve foreign policy objectives.⁷

Thus, emotions in international relations exert a significant influence on the geopolitical landscape, with the fear and anxiety surrounding China now eclipsing concerns about terrorism in the Western bloc.

China under Xi—Fear and Anxiety

Xi Jinping currently serves as the President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). His policy shift, dubbed “striving for achievement,” represents a departure from Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of “keeping a low profile and biding time.”⁸ Assuming leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Xi redirected Chinese foreign policy toward his new strategy

⁵ Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, “Emotion, Agency, and Power in World Politics,” in *The Power of Emotions in World Politics*, ed. Simon Koschut, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 186–91, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶ Shiping Tang, “Fear in International Politics: Two Positions,” *International Studies Review* 10, no. 3, (2008), 451–53, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

⁷ Muqtedar Khan and Isa Haskologlu, “Fear as Driver of International Relations,” *E-International Relations*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/>.

⁸ Sanjeev Kumar, “China’s South Asia Policy,” *India Quarterly* 75, no. 2 Special Issue: China (June 2019), 137, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

in 2013, unveiling the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to fulfill China's newfound international aspirations.⁹

Securing his third term of leadership during the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Xi amended the country's constitution in 2018 to eliminate term limits for the presidency, thereby paving the way for potential lifelong rule.¹⁰ Consequently, Xi Jinping has ascended to become China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong, the founder of the PRC.

Xi's redefined foreign policy and the elimination of legal constraints on his presidential term have sparked concerns among other nations regarding China's increasingly assertive role on the global stage. China's absence of democratic governance domestically, coupled with its partnerships with authoritarian regimes worldwide, poses an ideological challenge to the United States and other democratic nations, whose strategic goals revolve around advancing global democracy.

Going beyond ideological implications, China is emerging as an alternative development ally for smaller nations, evident in the widespread participation of states in the BRI. As the world's second-largest GDP holder with substantial investment capital, China is actively involved in infrastructure projects across numerous developing nations.

China's expanding influence with developing nations has raised alarm in the United States regarding its waning superpower status. As a result, Washington has redirected its strategic priorities from the war on terror to its *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, which promotes a "free and open Indo-Pacific." The concept of the Indo-Pacific extends beyond geographical boundaries, representing a shared identity among nations grappling with concerns and unease over China's rise. This regional framework influences the future course of the Asian regional order, underscoring the significance of emotional discourse in shaping international political dynamics.

Mutual concerns among nations have spurred collaboration to tackle shared challenges. Past events such as the terrorist attacks on the United States in 1998 and 2001, the 2008 attacks in India, and the 2015 Paris attacks have prompted concerted international efforts to combat terrorism. Similarly, China's perceived threats and the resulting anxieties are prompting the formation of regional and global alliances to counter Beijing's influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

⁹ Edward Wong, "Ending Congress, China Presents New Leadership Headed by Xi Jinping," *New York Times*, 14 November 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

¹⁰ "China's Xi secures third term, stacks leadership team with allies," *Al Jazeera*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>; and Yew Lun Tian, "Explainer: The ways China's Xi Jinping amassed power over a decade," *Reuters*, 10 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

China's Defense Strategy: Global Concern

China has unveiled a new defense strategy titled *China's National Defense in the New Era*. According to this strategy, China aims to foster collaboration among Asian nations through initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Council and by forging strategic partnerships with forums like the China–ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus).¹¹

Outlined in this white paper is China's sovereignty claim over the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Yellow Sea. China has reported conducting 72,000 rights protection and law enforcement operations, 4,600 maritime security patrols, and 80 joint exercises in these regions since 2012. It is noteworthy that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) comprises 4 million regular troops.¹²

Xi leads the highest decision-making body of the PLA and is dedicated to advancing the PLA into a world-class force. Presently, the PLA is modernizing its weaponry. In 2018, the PLA allowed the deployment of the Type 15 tank in high-altitude regions such as Tibet. Furthermore, the PLA Air Force has enhanced its capabilities with an array of stealth aircraft, notably the J-20 fighters. The PLA has shifted its focus toward becoming a major maritime power, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2016, China commissioned 18 ships, surpassing the US Navy's five commissioned ships that year. China has steadily expanded its nuclear arsenal, reaching an estimated 290 warheads in 2019.¹³ According to projections from the US Defense Department, China is anticipated to possess over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030.¹⁴ China has prioritized the development of antiship ballistic missiles capable of targeting US warships in the Western Pacific. Additionally, the PLA is advancing its hypersonic missile technology, enabling projectiles to travel at speeds significantly faster than the speed of sound.¹⁵ In 2020, China initiated the construction of three silo fields intended to house over 300 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). In 2021, China achieved a significant breakthrough by successfully testing a hypersonic glide vehicle that traversed a distance of 21,600 miles.¹⁶

¹¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, "China's New 2019 Defense White Paper," *Center for Strategic and International Relations*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.csis.org/>.

¹² Cordesman, "China's New 2019 Defense White Paper."

¹³ Lindsay Maizland, "China's Modernizing Military," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 February 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

¹⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, Henrik Stålhane Hiim, and Magnus Langset Trøan, "China's Misunderstood Nuclear Expansion," *Foreign Affairs*, 10 November 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

¹⁵ Maizland, "China's Modernizing Military."

¹⁶ Fravel, Hiim, and Trøan, "China's Misunderstood Nuclear Expansion."

China has significantly increased its defense spending to modernize its military, making it the second-largest defense budget spender globally after the United States. From 2000 to 2016, China's military budget experienced an annual growth rate of approximately 10 percent.¹⁷ According to data from Statista, in 2022, China's military budget reached USD 292 billion, while India's stood at USD 81 billion, Japan's at USD 46 billion, South Korea's at USD 46 billion, and Australia's at USD 32 billion—all of which are members of the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁸ Notably, the combined budgets of India, Japan, Australia, and South Korea are less than China's alone. This surge in China's military budget has raised regional and global concerns.

The PRC Ministry of Defense has outlined specific priority areas within China's defense strategy. These include safeguarding national political security, ensuring the security of its people and social stability; opposing and containing Taiwan's independence; suppressing advocates of separatist movements such as Tibetan independence and the establishment of East Turkistan; protecting China's maritime rights and interests; securing China's interests in outer space, electromagnetic space, and cyberspace; and safeguarding China's overseas interests.¹⁹

Furthermore, China's defense strategy asserts that the Senkaku Islands and the islands and other geographic features in the South China Sea are inalienable parts of Chinese territory. However, several other nations also claim sovereignty over these territories, and they are apprehensive about China's assertive defense strategy in the region.

China's Military Exercise in the Indo-Pacific

China's regular live exercises and military drills evoke fear and apprehension among neighboring nations in the region. These activities are often perceived as components of China's broader military aspirations and initiatives, prompting concerns regarding its intentions in the Indo-Pacific region.

In June 2023, China conducted military exercises in the East China Sea, north of Taiwan, featuring live-fire drills from warships.²⁰ This demonstration of military prowess was interpreted as a show of strength in the region. Subsequently, China

¹⁷ Timothy R. Heath, "Why Is China Strengthening Its Military? It's Not All About War," *RAND* (blog), 24 March 2023, <https://www.rand.org/>.

¹⁸ Einar H. Dyvik, "Countries with the highest military spending worldwide in 2022 (in billion U.S. dollars)," *Statista*, 30 November 2023, <https://www.statista.com/>.

¹⁹ "China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era" (policy statement, Ministry of Defense, People's Republic of China, n.d.), <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

²⁰ Ryan Woo and Albee Zhang, "China holds live-fire drills in East China Sea north of Taiwan," *Reuters*, 13 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

and Russia commenced joint military exercises in the Sea of Japan the following month, aimed at countering the US–Japan–South Korea cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.²¹ This joint exercise underscored the deepening military cooperation between China and Russia.

In September 2023, China conducted another extensive military drill, deploying an aircraft carrier and numerous naval vessels and aircraft, including missile destroyers, frigates, and supply ships. These exercises involved maneuvering through waters around Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Additionally, China dispatched at least 68 warplanes near Taiwanese airspace, signaling its assertiveness and readiness to challenge regional security dynamics.²²

China's frequent live exercises, military drills, and joint exercises with Russia have instilled a sense of fear and anxiety among the democratic nations in the Indo-Pacific region. These nations, which also serve as security partners of the United States, are apprehensive about China's escalating assertiveness and its potential implications for regional stability and security.

China's Defense Strategy: Fear and Anxiety in Taiwan

China's irredentist defense strategy prioritizes the seizure of Taiwan at all costs, which instills fear in the democratic portion of Taiwan's population. As highlighted in this article, China ranks second globally in military expenditure, trailing only the United States. The prospect of China's strategy, military expansion, and increased defense budget amplifies apprehension in Taiwan.

Comparatively, Taiwan's defense capabilities pale in comparison to China's. China boasts a ground army comprising 2,035,000 personnel, 260,000 navy personnel, and 395,000 air force personnel, while Taiwan maintains approximately 169,000 ground forces, 40,000 navy personnel, and 35,000 air force personnel. Furthermore, China possesses 4,800 tanks, 3,348 aircraft, 59 submarines, and 86 naval ships, whereas Taiwan's resources include 650 tanks, 691 aircraft, four submarines, and 26 naval vessels.²³

Given China's formidable military strength, bolstered military budget, and assertive strategy, the prospect of reunifying Taiwan remains a pressing concern, fostering fear and anxiety within the nation. In the event of a potential military conflict, China's armed forces would overwhelmingly surpass those of Taiwan.

²¹ Yukio Tajima, "China and Russia kick off military exercises in Sea of Japan," *Nikkei Asia*, 21 July 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

²² David Pierson and Amy Chang Chien, "China Conducts Major Military Exercises in Western Pacific," *New York Times*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

²³ "China and Taiwan: A really simple guide," *BBC News*, 7 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

Additionally, China's single-party governance stands in stark contrast to Taiwan's democratic principles, exacerbating ideological differences and contributing to the prevailing sense of fear and anxiety in Taiwan.

South China Sea Tensions: Growing Conflict among Nations

China has asserted its sovereignty over specific territories in the South China Sea. However, nations bordering the South China Sea, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Malaysia, oppose China's territorial claims in the region. Despite international courts having ruled in favor of these rival claimants, China has illegally established advanced military infrastructure and is constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea.²⁴ China's objectives include controlling overfishing, oil, and gas reserves in the region, sparking anxiety among other South China Sea nations about China's escalating and aggressive military strategy.

Historically, China has aggressively pursued complete dominance over the South China Sea. In 1974, Chinese forces seized the Parcel Islands from Vietnam, resulting in the deaths of at least 70 Vietnamese troops. Another confrontation between Vietnam and China occurred in 1988. In 2012, China and the Philippines were embroiled in a prolonged maritime standoff, with each accusing the other of encroachment in the Scarborough Shoal.²⁵ Such confrontations continue today.

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, more than "21% of global trade, totaling \$3.37 trillion, transited through the South China Sea in 2016."²⁶ Consequently, the United States, as the largest economic power and a global superpower, harbors concerns regarding China's expansive claims and military presence in the South China Sea, a crucial artery for international trade. On one hand, China's rapid military modernization has targeted the United States, fueling apprehensions and fears of potential conflict. Meanwhile, the United States' democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific face direct threats from China's military buildup and aggressive foreign policy.

India–China Relations: From Panchsheel to Tensions—A Shift in Dynamics

India and China have historically maintained enduring bilateral relations, with *Panchsheel* serving as a foundational policy for peaceful coexistence between the

²⁴ Salvador Santino F. Regilme, "Beyond Paradigms: Understanding the South China Sea Dispute Using Analytic Eclecticism," *International Studies* 55, no. 3 (2018): 213–37, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁵ Regilme, "Beyond Paradigms."

²⁶ Regilme, "Beyond Paradigms."

two nations, even amid the turbulence of the Cold War era.²⁷ Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once remarked that “Relations between India and China are unique in the world.”²⁸

However, in 2020, the dynamic between the two countries shifted dramatically. The Galwan Valley clash in 2020 was a violent confrontation between Indian and Chinese troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the disputed Galwan Valley region, located in the Ladakh region of the Himalayas. The clash occurred in June 2020 and resulted in casualties on both sides, with 20 Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese soldiers losing their lives. Tensions escalated following the clash, leading to increased military presence and heightened security measures along the India–China border. The incident significantly strained bilateral relations between the two countries and prompted widespread international concern about the escalation of border disputes and military tensions in the region.²⁹

In 2021, the Chinese legislature enacted a land borders law that underscored the importance of integrating border defense with socio-economic development

²⁷ *Panchsheel*, also known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, is a set of principles that guide diplomatic relations between countries, particularly India and China. The term *panchsheel* originates from the Sanskrit words “panch,” meaning five, and “sheel,” meaning virtues or principles. These principles were first formally enunciated in the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement, signed between India’s then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and China’s Premier Zhou Enlai, aimed at resolving border disputes and fostering peaceful relations between the two nations.

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are:

Mutual Respect for Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity: This principle emphasizes respecting each other’s sovereignty and territorial boundaries, thereby preventing any form of aggression or interference in each other’s internal affairs.

Mutual Nonaggression: Both parties agree not to use force or threats of force against each other, promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts and disputes through dialogue and diplomacy.

Noninterference in Each Other’s Internal Affairs: This principle underscores the importance of respecting each other’s political and social systems, refraining from interfering in domestic affairs, and maintaining sovereignty over internal governance.

Equality and Mutual Benefit: Both countries commit to fostering equal and mutually beneficial relations, ensuring that agreements and cooperation initiatives are fair, balanced, and beneficial to both parties.

Peaceful Coexistence: The ultimate goal of Panchsheel is to promote peace, harmony, and cooperation between nations, fostering a conducive environment for mutual understanding, friendship, and development.

Panchsheel has served as a guiding framework for diplomatic relations not only between India and China but also between other nations globally. It encapsulates the principles of mutual respect, nonaggression, noninterference, equality, and peaceful coexistence, providing a foundation for fostering stable and harmonious international relations.

²⁸ Manmohan Singh, “Prime Minister’s speech at the Central Party School in Beijing—India and China in the New Era” (press release, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 24 October 2013), <https://pib.gov.in/>.

²⁹ Sriparna Pathak and Obja Borah Hazarika, “Reasons and Reactions to the Galwan Clash: An Indian Perspective,” *Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 9, no. 2 (2022): 83–101, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

in border regions. This legislation was seen as a strategic move to strengthen China's territorial claims and border security.³⁰ The decision sparked apprehension in New Delhi, leading to a significant shift in India's foreign policy.

Previously, India had sought to maintain a balance between countering China and fostering cooperation and trade relations. However, the new stance from Beijing led India to adopt a more defensive posture, viewing China with increased suspicion and caution. New Delhi took decisive actions to safeguard its interests. This included imposing restrictions on certain Chinese firms and investments in India, a move that signaled India's intent to reduce its economic dependence on China. Furthermore, India ramped up its border infrastructure projects in strategically important regions such as Ladakh and the Arunachal Province. These initiatives were aimed at bolstering India's defense capabilities and ensuring a swift response to any potential threats.³¹

The rise of China on the global stage has led to a complex geopolitical landscape. The South China Sea, the Taiwan straits, and the China–India border are all potential flashpoints. The international community is closely watching these regions, as any escalation could have far-reaching implications.

China's Cyber and Outer Space Reach: Global Concern

China has faced allegations of conducting extensive overseas surveillance and manipulating its global agenda through cyberspace. These accusations stem from concerns about China's growing technological prowess and its potential misuse for geopolitical gains.

In 2018, a significant incident brought these concerns to the forefront. It was discovered that there had been a data leak from the new headquarters of the African Union in Ethiopia. This building was not only funded by the Chinese government but also constructed by Huawei, a leading Chinese multinational technology company.³²

This incident raised serious questions about the security of information within such infrastructures. Critics argue that it underscores the risks associated with accepting foreign investments from countries like China in critical sectors, especially when these investments involve the deployment of technology infrastructure.

³⁰ Nishant Rajeev and Alex Stephenson, "Why We Should All Worry About the China-India Border Dispute," *United States Institute of Peace*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.usip.org/>.

³¹ Rajat Pandit, "India going full-steam ahead to reduce border infrastructure," *Times of India*, 16 November 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

³² Ghalia Kadiri and Joan Tilouine, "In Addis Ababa, the seat of the African Union spied on by Beijing," *Le Monde*, 26 January 2018, <https://www.lemonde.fr/>.

The data leak incident at the African Union headquarters is often cited as an example of how state-backed entities could potentially exploit technological advancements for surveillance and data gathering. It has led to increased scrutiny of Chinese investments in technology infrastructure worldwide, particularly in regions where China has significant strategic interests.

In her 2019 study, Sheena Chestnut Greitens highlights that a minimum of 80 countries have adopted Chinese policy and surveillance technology. This is part of a broader concern that China is aiding authoritarian regimes worldwide by enhancing their surveillance capabilities over their citizens.³³

Reports have emerged suggesting that Huawei technicians have assisted the governments of Uganda and Zambia in conducting surveillance on political opponents. These allegations, if true, raise serious questions about the ethical use of technology and its potential misuse for political gains.³⁴

Moreover, several countries, including Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Uganda, have shown interest in adopting Chinese digital surveillance policies. This trend indicates a growing influence of China in shaping the digital surveillance landscape in these countries. It also raises concerns about the potential impact on civil liberties and privacy rights.

Chinese companies have been active in selling surveillance systems to various states. These systems often include advanced technologies such as AI-powered facial recognition. Countries such as Ecuador, Iran, Kenya, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe have reportedly procured such systems.³⁵ The proliferation of these technologies could have significant implications for individual privacy and state control.

TikTok, a popular social media application developed by the Chinese company ByteDance, has been the subject of scrutiny in the United States due to national security concerns. The primary apprehension stems from the potential risk of user data leakage to China. Given the vast amount of personal data the app collects, there are fears that this information could be accessed by the Chinese government, potentially compromising the privacy and security of millions of users.

In addition to data privacy issues, there are concerns about content manipulation on the platform. TikTok's algorithm, which determines the visibility and reach of content, is not transparent. This has led to allegations that the platform could be

³³ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Surveillance with Chinese Characteristics: The Development & Global Export of Chinese Policing Technology" (white paper, University of Missouri, 30 September 2019), <https://ncgg.princeton.edu/>.

³⁴ Joe Parkinson, Nicholas Bariyo, and Josh Chin, "Huawei Technicians Helped African Governments Spy on Political Opponents," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 August 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

³⁵ Danielle Cave, "The African Union Headquarters Hack and Australia's 5G Network," *The Strategist*, 13 July 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

used to suppress or promote certain types of content based on political or other considerations.

There have been ongoing accusations that TikTok has engaged in the censorship of political content. Specifically, content related to movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #GeorgeFloyd, and the Hong Kong prodemocracy protests have reportedly been suppressed. Critics argue that this could be an attempt to control the narrative around these significant social and political events.³⁶

These concerns have sparked a broader debate about the role and responsibility of social media platforms in shaping public discourse, protecting user data, and upholding freedom of expression. As the influence of such platforms continues to grow, these issues are likely to remain at the forefront of discussions on digital rights and internet governance.

In response to concerns about potential Chinese surveillance in cyberspace, India has taken significant measures to safeguard its digital space. One such measure was the prohibition of 11 Chinese phone brands, including Oppo, OnePlus, Vivo, and Xiaomi, specifically for military use. This decision was driven by the apprehension that these devices could potentially be used as conduits for cyberespionage.³⁷

In addition to this, India has enforced stringent restrictions on various Chinese apps within its borders. In a sweeping move in 2020, India implemented bans on at least 219 Chinese apps across three distinct phases. This included popular apps like AliExpress, TikTok, Shareit, and Likee, which had millions of users in India. These bans were implemented under the premise of protecting national security and safeguarding the privacy of Indian citizens.

The trend of banning Chinese apps continued into 2022, with India prohibiting an additional 54 Chinese apps. These actions reflect India's growing concerns about data privacy and digital sovereignty in the face of potential foreign surveillance.³⁸

In 2020, the United Kingdom made a significant decision regarding its telecommunications infrastructure. The UK government announced a ban on the acquisition of new Huawei 5G equipment after 31 December 2020. This decision was part of a broader strategy to eliminate all 5G infrastructure from Chinese firms

³⁶ Fergus Ryan, Danielle Cave, and Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, "Mapping More of China's Technology Giants," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 25 November 2019, <https://www.aspi.org.au/>.

³⁷ "Indian Army bans use of Chinese mobile phones of 11 brands," *Hindustan Samachar*, 14 March 2023, <https://english.hindusthansamachar.in/>.

³⁸ Divya Bhati, "Full list of Chinese apps banned in India so far: PUBG Mobile, Garena Free Fire, TikTok and hundreds more," *India Today*, 21 August 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/>.

within UK networks by the end of 2027.³⁹ This move was driven by concerns about potential surveillance activities by the Chinese government in cyberspace. The UK's decision was based on the advice of the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), which concluded that the security of Huawei's products could no longer be guaranteed due to the impact of US sanctions on its supply chain.⁴⁰

UK Digital Secretary Oliver Dowden, when announcing this decision in the House of Commons, stated, "It is the right one for the UK telecoms networks, for our national security, and our economy, both now and indeed in the long run."⁴¹ This statement underscores the UK government's commitment to safeguarding national security and economic interests.

In October 2022, the UK government issued legal notices to 35 UK operators, putting the government's previous position to remove Huawei kit from UK 5G networks on a legal footing. The key deadline to remove all Huawei equipment in the UK's 5G network by 2027 remains unchanged.⁴²

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed strong approval of the United Kingdom's decision to eliminate Huawei's 5G equipment from its telecommunications infrastructure. He stated, "We want to see every nation who understands freedom and democracy and values that, and knows that it's important to their own people, to their own sovereign country, to understand the threat that the Chinese Communist Party is posing to them, and to work both themselves and collectively to restore what is rightfully ours."⁴³

Pompeo's underscored the global trend of countries taking decisive actions to protect their national security interests in the digital domain. Pompeo's applause for the United Kingdom's decision highlights the alignment between the United States and United Kingdom on this issue. It also signals US support for other countries taking similar steps to protect their national security interests in the face of potential cyberthreats.

India, the United States, and the United Kingdom harbor concerns regarding the utilization of Chinese digital devices, telecommunication equipment, and networks in their countries and developing nations. These concerns extend beyond

³⁹ Leo Kelion, "Huawei 5G kit must be removed from UK by 2027," *BBC News*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

⁴⁰ "Huawei legal notices issued" (press release, UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 13 October 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

⁴¹ "Huawei to be removed from UK 5G networks by 2027" (press release, UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 14 July 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

⁴² "Huawei legal notices issued."

⁴³ Quoted in Heather Stewart, "Mike Pompeo praises UK decision to remove Huawei from 5G network," *The Guardian*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

military apprehensions, encompassing anxieties about cybersecurity and bilateral trade in the cyber domain.

Additionally, China has made significant strides in its space capabilities, demonstrating advanced space-based command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. This includes a growing fleet of modern launch vehicles that can send a variety of payloads into space, from satellites to manned missions.

One of China's notable achievements in space technology is the BeiDou satellite navigation program. This system, which is comparable to the US Global Positioning System (GPS), provides accurate positioning and timing services to users worldwide, enhancing China's capabilities in navigation and communication.

In addition to these capabilities, China has developed an array of counterspace and antisatellite (ASAT) weapons. These include kinetic-kill weapons, which destroy satellites through physical impact, directed-energy weapons that can disrupt or damage satellites, co-orbital weapons that can maneuver in space to interfere with other satellites, and cyberweapons that can hack into satellite systems.⁴⁴

China also boasts an advanced manned space program, which has achieved several milestones, including manned missions, spacewalks, and the establishment of modular space stations. China's space program, initiated in the 1950s, has set ambitious goals to become a global leader in space exploration by 2045. The country is diligently building its space-related hard-power capabilities, with a rapid expansion of its space exploration efforts. This includes exploration of celestial bodies, such as the moon and Mars, and the study of celestial phenomena.

These advancements underscore China's commitment to becoming a major player in space exploration and technology. However, they also raise important questions about space security, international cooperation, and the peaceful use of outer space.⁴⁵

Indeed, the growth of China's cyber capabilities and its active engagement in cyber activities globally have amplified concerns about its overseas surveillance practices. The potential for data leakage, coupled with allegations of content manipulation and censorship, has led to a heightened sense of fear and vigilance among nations. This is particularly true for countries that are heavily reliant on Chinese technology infrastructure or have significant Chinese investments.

⁴⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman and Joseph Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2016: A Comparative Analysis* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016), 427–53, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

⁴⁵ Most. Farjana Sharmin, "China's Increasing Space Power and India–China Orbital Competitions: Implications in the Indo-Pacific with a Focus on South Asia," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 8 (November–December 2023): 53–73, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

In parallel, China's advancements in outer space capabilities have been equally noteworthy. Its assertive behavior in space activities, including the development of advanced C4ISR capabilities, counterspace weapons, and a robust manned space program, have raised fears of an escalating competition in outer space. The potential militarization of space and the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies have added a new dimension to global security concerns.

Overall, China's increasing presence in both the cyber and outer space domains has significantly influenced the geopolitical dynamics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The sense of apprehension among these nations is not just about the technological advancements but also about the potential implications for their national security, sovereignty, and regional stability. As a result, these nations are now more motivated than ever to bolster their own cyber and space capabilities, while also seeking to establish norms and regulations that ensure the peaceful and secure use of these domains. This evolving landscape underscores the need for continued dialogue, cooperation, and transparency among nations to address these shared challenges.

China as an Ideological Threat to Democracy

Despite its meteoric economic rise and its status as the world's second-largest economy, China operates under an authoritarian political system rather than a democratic one. This presents a unique model to the world, demonstrating that rapid economic development can occur outside the framework of a democratic system.

In 2017, President Xi articulated this perspective, stating that China was forging a new path for other developing countries to achieve modernization. This statement can be interpreted as an indication of China's ambition to export its domestic political model to other states, particularly those in the developing world. The underlying message is that economic growth and modernization are achievable under an authoritarian regime.⁴⁶

This perspective, however, has raised concerns among advocates of democratic governance. Christopher Wray, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), has expressed the belief that China poses a threat not only to specific US interests but also to the survival of democracy and the US-led international order. Wray's viewpoint underscores the perceived challenges that China's rise presents to the established global order.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracy?: China's Rise and the Future of Global Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, 11 July 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

⁴⁷ Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracy?"

In Australia, there have been controversies surrounding political donations linked to Beijing, as well as allegations of pressure tactics and compromising relationships. These concerns have led to the implementation of new laws aimed at countering foreign interference.

In 2018, the Australian Government introduced the National Security Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018 (EFI Act) to combat the growing challenge of foreign interference. This legislation amended existing offenses in the Criminal Code Act 1995 and introduced new national security offenses.⁴⁸

The Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018 was also established, which requires individuals or entities undertaking certain activities on behalf of foreign principals to register and provide information about the nature of their relationships.⁴⁹

These legislative measures were taken in response to concerns about potential foreign influence on Australia's political processes and national security. They represent Australia's efforts to safeguard its democratic processes and institutions from undue foreign influence. As a result of these developments, resources and technology associated with China's overseas policies are often viewed with suspicion in Australia. They are seen as potential threats, particularly in the context of the broader geopolitical tensions between China and other nations.

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China has a significant influence on global decision making. It has been observed that China often aligns itself with nations such as Iran, North Korea, and Myanmar, which have not embraced democratic governance. This alignment is not merely coincidental but seems to be a strategic choice, reflecting China's geopolitical interests and ideological leanings.

In the UNSC, China appears to be leading a coalition of nations that lack robust democratic institutions. This coalition includes countries like Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Myanmar. These nations, each with its own unique political context, have found common ground with China on various international issues.

This coalition is often perceived as an alliance of authoritarianism, standing in contrast to the democratic world. The formation of such alliances is not uncommon in international relations, as nations with similar political systems or shared interests often band together to amplify their influence on the global stage.

However, the emergence of this alliance has raised concerns among democratic nations. They fear that the growing influence of this coalition could challenge the

⁴⁸ "Espionage and foreign interference," Australian Federal Police, n.d., <https://www.afp.gov.au/>.

⁴⁹ Evelyn Douek, "What's in Australia's New Laws on Foreign Interference in Domestic Politics," *Lawfare* (blog), 11 July 2018, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/>.

democratic norms and values that underpin the current international order. These concerns are further amplified by China's increasing economic and military power, which could potentially be used to support its allies and promote its political model.

This evolving dynamic underscores the need for democratic nations to reaffirm their commitment to democratic values and principles, while also engaging with China and other nondemocratic nations in a constructive dialogue to address shared challenges and promote peace and stability.

Geopolitical Consequences of the Fear of China

The fear of China has heightened among several nations. Consequently, these nations are formulating counterstrategies grounded in offensive realism. It is becoming easier for these nations to devise a response when public sentiment is against China. In 2021, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that a vast majority of respondents in the United States, Canada, Australia, much of Western Europe, and the more developed states of Asia hold unfavorable views toward China. These individuals also doubt Xi's commitment toward fostering a peaceful world.⁵⁰

Another survey, disclosed in 2020 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, indicated that 75 percent of elites in these regions advocate forming a counter coalition as the optimal approach to address China.⁵¹ China has already heightened apprehension among nations such as the United States, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These concerned nations are contemplating the formation of a coalition to counter China. The escalating fear and anxiety surrounding China's assertive ascendancy on the global stage have precipitated significant geopolitical ramifications.

Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, in their exploration of the interplay between emotions, discourse, and language, have highlighted how these elements can be instrumental in exerting power.⁵² This concept can be applied to understand the dynamics of China's engagement with developing countries.

In this context, a discourse termed *China's debt trap* has been constructed by Western nations. This term refers to a narrative where China is perceived to be strategically luring developing countries into debt through large infrastructure

⁵⁰ Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, "Views of China," Pew Research Center, 27 July 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>; and Michael Beckley, "Enemies of My Enemy: How Fear of China Is Forging a New World Order," *Foreign Affairs*, 14 February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

⁵¹ "Mapping the Future of U.S. China Policy," CSIS, 2020, <https://chinasurvey.csis.org/>.

⁵² Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, "Theorizing Emotions in World Politics," *International Theory* 6, no. 3 (2014): 491–514, <https://doi.org/>.

loans, thereby gaining significant influence over these nations when they are unable to repay.

A case in point is Sri Lanka's experience with the Chinese infrastructure loan for the development of the Hambantota Port. The Sri Lankan government, unable to repay the loan, was compelled to concede the port to China on a 99-year lease in 2017. This incident served to reinforce the China's debt-trap narrative, emphasizing the potentially unsustainable nature of China's loans to developing nations.

The China's debt-trap discourse has gained considerable traction, shaping perceptions and influencing policy decisions related to China's overseas investments. It underscores the potential risks associated with such loans and the need for developing nations to carefully consider the long-term implications of accepting large infrastructure loans. Similar to how the term *war on terrorism* instilled fear and raised concerns about terrorism, the term *China's debt trap* similarly raises apprehensions about the risks associated with Chinese debt in developing nations.

Given China's autocratic governance model and its perceived promotion of similar systems in other nations, there is potential for a global coalition to form under the banner of democracy versus autocracy. This dichotomy represents a broader ideological conflict between nations that uphold democratic values and those that follow autocratic principles.

In 2021, US President Joe Biden underscored this rivalry during his first presidential meeting. He expressed that US-China rivalry is part of a broader competition between democracy and autocracy.⁵³ To advance this narrative and promote democratic values, the United States initiated a conference known as the "Summit for Democracy" in 2021. The objective of these summits is to nurture global democracy, unite nations that uphold democratic values, and address the challenges that democracy faces in the contemporary world.

These summits serve as a platform for democratic nations to share best practices, discuss common challenges, and strengthen their commitment to democratic principles. They provide an opportunity for leaders from government, civil society, and the private sector to set forth an affirmative agenda for democratic renewal and to tackle the greatest threats faced by democracies today through collective action.

Moreover, these summits aim to draw a clear distinction between the democratic and nondemocratic worlds. By doing so, they highlight the differences in governance

⁵³ Evelyn Cheng, "Biden calls for the U.S. to become more competitive against a 'deadly earnest' China," *CNBC*, 29 April 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/>.

models, human rights practices, and international engagement between democratic and autocratic nations.⁵⁴

The democratic world, along with nations in the South China Sea, is contending with the uncertainty surrounding China's future intentions. Presently, there is no discernible indication of peaceful cooperation. As Tang elucidated, offensive realism is utilized to confront the apprehension that emerges when nations are uncertain about the intentions of others.

In the Indo-Pacific region, the shift in Chinese foreign policy and the ambiguity surrounding its future intentions have intensified apprehensions among nations. Consequently, these nations, driven by their concerns, are formulating counter-policies grounded in offensive realism.

In response to these developments, four democratic nations—the US, Australia, Japan, and India—initiated a strategic dialogue known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Contrary to some perceptions, the Quad is not a military alliance. It is a platform for these nations to engage in dialogue and cooperate on matters of shared interest in the Indo-Pacific region.

These nations do conduct joint military exercises and provide aid to regional nations, including arms and training. However, their collective vision extends beyond military cooperation. They aim to ensure a free and open South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific. While not all states in the Indo-Pacific that share concerns about China are members of the Quad, the Quad members play a significant role in providing military aid in the region. This aid is part of a broader strategy to maintain regional stability and balance of power.⁵⁵

In 2023, the United States unveiled a military aid package worth USD 345 million for Taiwan. This aid serves as a means to enhance Taiwan's defenses against potential threats from China, encompassing defense, education, and training initiatives for the Taiwanese. Additionally, the aid includes man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), intelligence and surveillance capabilities, firearms, and missiles. However, the objective of this aid extends beyond military prowess. It also aims to uphold Taiwan's autonomy and foster regional stability. By furnishing this assistance, Washington seeks to ensure that Taiwan can safeguard its interests and uphold its position in the face of any potential aggression.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Jon Temin, "The U.S. Doesn't Need Another Democracy Summit: It Needs a Plan to Confront Authoritarianism," *Foreign Affairs*, 27 March 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

⁵⁵ Sheila A. Smith, "The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, 27 May 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/>; and Jagannath P. Panda and Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell, *Quad Plus and Indo-Pacific: The Changing Profile of International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁵⁶ Nomaan Merchant et al., "US announces \$345 million military aid package for Taiwan," *Associated Press*, 29 July 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

Vietnam has expressed significant concerns regarding China's policy in the South China Sea, which has resulted in frequent intrusions into Vietnamese waters and harassment of ships engaged in oil and gas exploration. Consequently, Vietnam faces challenges due to its relatively less robust military strength compared to China.

In response to these challenges, Japan, a major power in the Indo-Pacific region, has extended military assistance to Vietnam as part of a broader strategy to counter the perceived threat from China. This assistance encompasses defense equipment and technology transfers, with ongoing discussions for a new Japanese aid program targeting militaries of like-minded developing countries in the region.⁵⁷

Furthermore, Japan has expanded its military aid package for the Philippines, providing coastal surveillance radars for the Philippine Navy, additional patrol vessels, defense equipment, and radars to bolster the Philippines' maritime law enforcement capabilities.⁵⁸

These actions by Japan underscore the evolving military strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, increasingly shaped by concerns and apprehensions surrounding China's growing influence. This shift entails a focus on preparedness, partnerships, and regional integration as key components of the region's defense strategy, aiming to deter conflict and ensure military readiness. Thus, the military strategy of the Indo-Pacific region is significantly influenced by the fear and anxiety surrounding China's actions and intentions.

China has made substantial investments under its BRI, to the tune of an estimated USD 1 trillion in more than 150 countries and international organizations. This initiative aims to boost economic development and interregional connectivity, significantly broadening China's economic and political influence.⁵⁹

In response to China's growing influence, several coalitions and initiatives have been formed. One potential coalition is the Group of Seven (G-7), an intergovernmental organization consisting of seven of the world's largest advanced economies. The G-7 launched the go (B3W) initiative in June 2021. This initiative aims to provide an alternative to China's BRI for infrastructure development in low- and middle-income countries. This was later rebranded as the Partnership for Global

⁵⁷ Associated Press, "Japan, Vietnam to Discuss Japanese Military Aid Amid China Threat," *Voice of America*, 27 November 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

⁵⁸ Jason Gutierrez, "Philippines, Japan boost military ties amid tensions in South China Sea," *Benar News*, 3 November 2023, <https://www.benarnews.org/>.

⁵⁹ Michael Beckley, "Enemies of My Enemy: How Fear of China Is Forging a New World Order," *Foreign Affairs*, 14 February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

Infrastructure and Investment—a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership led by major democracies.⁶⁰

Similarly, the European Union has launched the Global Gateway initiative. This strategy aims to boost smart, clean, and secure connections in digital, energy, and transport sectors, and to strengthen health, education, and research systems across the world. Like the B3W and its successor programs, the Global Gateway is designed to offer an alternative to China's BRI strategy.⁶¹

In addition to these initiatives, Australia, Japan, and India have formed the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI). Launched in April 2021, the SCRI is a trilateral agreement that aims to reduce dependence on Chinese foreign trade. The goal of this initiative is to create a “virtuous cycle” of enhancing supply chain resilience, leading to strong, sustainable, balanced, and inclusive growth in the Indo-Pacific region.⁶²

These initiatives reflect a broader global trend of seeking to balance China's growing influence and ensure more robust and diverse supply chains. They represent strategic efforts to maintain regional order and stability while promoting sustainable development and interregional connectivity.

Conclusion

China's rise has escalated fear worldwide. Its aggressive expansion in military, overseas, and surveillance strategies is reshaping global power dynamics and the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

China's emergence as a dominant economic power has driven its military expansion and assertive foreign policy revision. This shift in Chinese foreign policy has provoked anxieties among various nations. In response to these fears, democratic nations have emphasized the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific region to counter China's BRI. China's increased defense spending and territorial claims have instilled fear in regional nations, leading them to rely on multilateral groups like the Quad.

The concerns about China's rise extend beyond military confrontations. They include digital surveillance, cyberthreats, and economic entanglements, culminating in debt-trap diplomacy in developing countries.

⁶⁰ Conor M. Savoy and Shannon McKeown, “Future Considerations for the Partnership on Global Infrastructure and Investment,” CSIS, 29 June 2022, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁶¹ Simone Tagliapietra, “The Global Gateway: An Overview,” *Infrastructure Policy Initiative*, August 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.

⁶² Jagannath Panda, “The Structural Limits of the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative,” *Pacific Forum*, 8 July 2021, <https://pacforum.org/>.

In reaction to these fears, nations have collectively established strategic partnerships, imposed bans on Chinese technology, and made concerted efforts to counter China's assertiveness. These shared apprehensions regarding China's expanding influence shape regional alliances and global responses. Consequently, fear and anxiety have bolstered coalition formation, unifying nations based on their social, political, and military experiences of China's rise.

Ultimately, the fear factor associated with China reshapes global geopolitics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, altering everyday geopolitical reality. The fears and anxieties triggered by China prompt collective responses and alliances among nations with shared concerns. The interplay between fear, power dynamics, and international relations stands as a critical facet of the evolving global order, indicating that the emotions of nations can profoundly influence the direction of global affairs. 🌐

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Countering China Starts with the Philippines

Maj David Geaney, USAF

Abstract

As China escalates its assertive tactics in the South China Sea, the United States must take bolder action to support its regional allies and partners, starting with the Philippines. This article argues that the United States should begin directly escorting Philippine vessels within their exclusive economic zone, employing nonlethal measures like water cannons to counter Chinese harassment. This measured but resolute stance would send a clear deterrent signal to Beijing, build confidence with Manila and other Asian allies, and emulate the gray-zone tactics China itself uses. Additionally, the United States should encourage the Philippines' "assertive transparency" strategy to rally broader international condemnation of China's expansionist claims. While stopping short of overt military conflict, this multifaceted approach would demonstrate the United States' reliability as a regional security partner and put pressure on China to adhere to international norms. Concrete action to defend the Philippines' sovereignty is a critical first step in countering China's ambitions across the Indo-Pacific.

The United States ought to initiate the escorting of Philippine ships within their exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and confront Chinese aggressors utilizing similar tactics deployed against rival states. This entails readiness to employ water cannons and other nonlethal measures against Chinese vessels while ensuring the safe passage of Philippine vessels. Such actions will foster trust with the Philippines and other Asian allies and partners, simultaneously conveying an unmistakable message: the United States staunchly supports nations facing bullying tactics from China.

China endeavors to impose a Monroe Doctrine with Chinese characteristics across Asia, leveraging its revamped Maritime Traffic Safety Law of 2021 as a tool to unlawfully police foreign vessels beyond its rightful jurisdiction, extending throughout its self-proclaimed ten-dash line (fig. 1).¹ To counteract this, the United States must cultivate trust among our regional partners and allies while conveying a resolute message that Beijing cannot arbitrarily assert dominance over other na-

¹ "Topic: China's Maritime Traffic Safety Law" (fact sheet, US Indo-Pacific Command, 21 August 2023), <https://www.pacom.mil/>; and Colin Clark, "New Chinese 10-Dash map sparks furor across Indo-Pacific: Vietnam, India, Philippines, Malaysia," *Breaking Defense*, 1 September 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/>.

tions. A tepid response to China's illicit activities will dissuade Asian partners and embolden China to expand the application of its Maritime Traffic Safety Law into other spheres, posing even greater threats to international commerce in the East and South China Seas.

China's belligerence manifests prominently within the Philippines' EEZ, marked by a decade-long pattern of Chinese harassment intensifying notably in 2023, with 2024 poised for further escalation.²

Though the United States has restated its commitment under the 1951 US–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty to defend Philippine vessels in the South China Sea, Washington's resolution to follow through on that commitment remains unproven.³ Providing escort to Philippine ships within their EEZ would convey a resolute message to China and compel Beijing to contemplate the repercussions of its aggressive maneuvers should they target US interests. These escort operations would strategically maintain a stance below the threshold of conflict, mirroring the gray-zone tactics employed by China.

Recent joint patrols with the Philippines and the forthcoming announcement of trilateral patrols with Japan later this year underscore Washington's acknowledgment that mere rhetoric and official declarations are insufficient to dissuade China.⁴ However, these measures fall short, as illustrated by China's provocations on 5 March and 23 March 2024, resulting in injuries to numerous Philippine sailors.⁵ These incidents unfolded as China endeavored to blockade the Philippines from resupplying Second Thomas Shoal well within its internationally recognized EEZ.⁶

² Shannon Tiezzi, "Gregory Poling on Escalating Tension in the South China," *The Diplomat*, 31 December 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

³ Matthew Miller, "U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea" (press statement, US Department of State, 5 August 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁴ Sebastian Strangio, "US, Philippines, China Begin Simultaneous South China Sea Patrols," *The Diplomat*, 4 January 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>; Phelim Kine, Alexander Ward, and Lara Seligman, "US, Japan, Philippines plan joint South China Sea naval patrols," *Politico*, 29 March 2024, <https://www.politico.com/>; and Office of the Spokesman, "U.S. Support for our Philippine Allies in the Face of Repeated PRC Harassment in the South China Sea" (press statement, US Department of State, 22 October 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁵ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "4 Philippine Sailors Injured, 2 Vessels Damaged in Chinese Attempt to Block Second Thomas Shoal Resupply" *USNI News*, 5 March 2024, <https://news.usni.org/>; and Associated Press, "Chinese Coast Guard Hits Philippine Boat With Water Cannons; Crew Hurt," *VOA News*, 23 March 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

⁶ "South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What's Next?" (issue brief, U.S-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 12 July 2016), <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

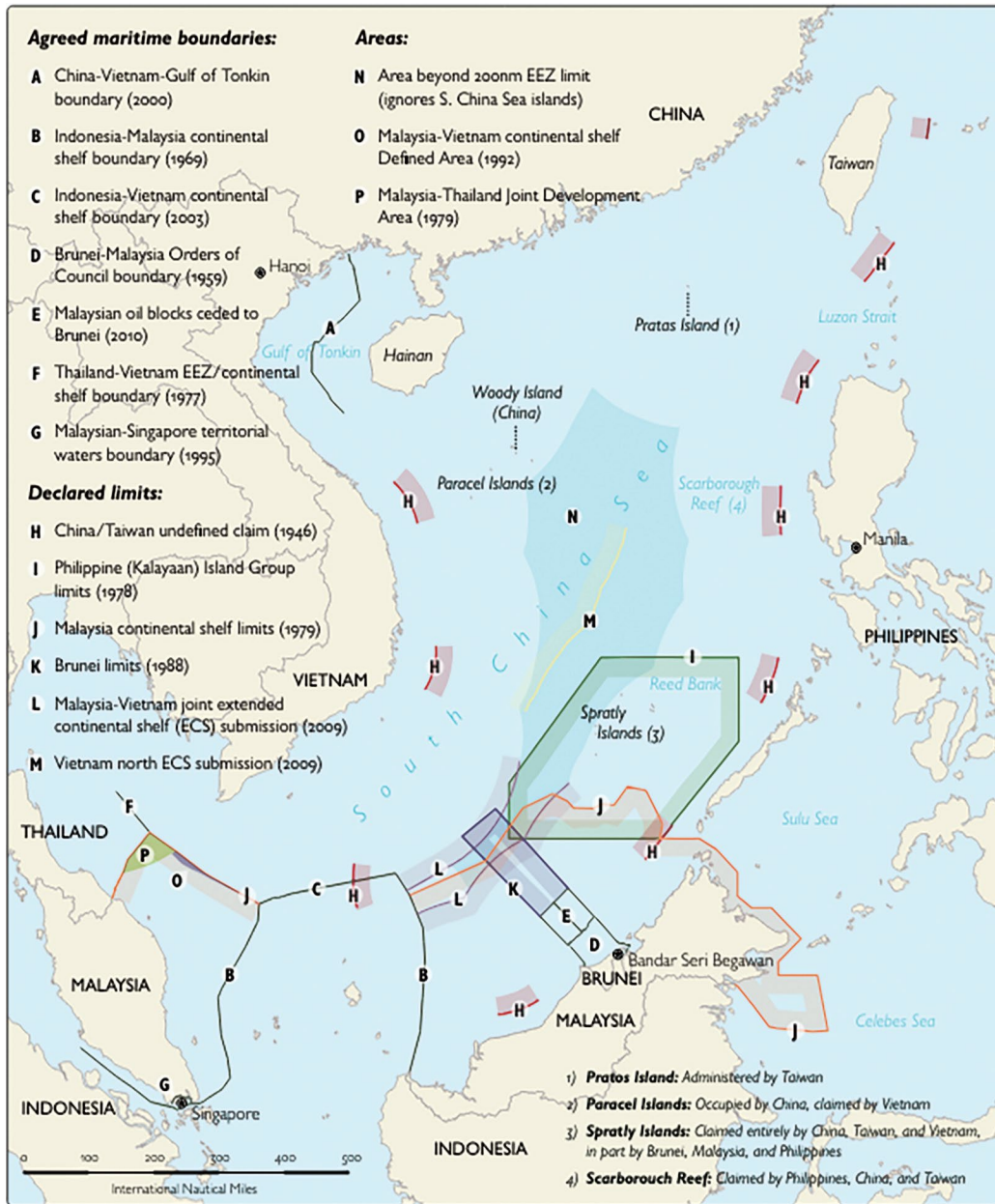


Figure 1. China's ten-dash line. (Source: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2012 [Washington: DOD, May 2012], 37, <https://dod.defense.gov/>.)

In recent months, the Philippines has launched a “transparency campaign,” shedding light on China’s aggressive tactics to garner broader international support and condemnation of their actions.⁷ While this has elicited some international outcry following the documented harassment of Philippine vessels, substantive actions against China have remained elusive.⁸

Nevertheless, transparency is proving instrumental in securing partnerships for the Philippines. This is evidenced by the recent agreement between the Philippines and Vietnam to bolster cooperation and foster interoperability between their respective coast guards.⁹ Moreover, India’s recent steadfast backing of the Philippines can also be attributed to this transparency-driven approach.¹⁰

The Philippine strategy, coined *assertive transparency* by Ray Powell and Benjamin Goirigolzarri, presents a viable model that warrants emulation by other South China Sea claimants grappling with similar belligerence from China, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia.¹¹ The United States ought to prioritize engagement with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states, urging them to adopt the Philippines’ approach. This initiative would foster consensus among Southeast Asian nations, promoting a unified, multilateral stance to counter this aggression, while soliciting international backing against China’s irredentist overreach.

China typically opts for bilateral negotiations with smaller nations, where it holds considerable leverage. However, a more unified stance by ASEAN and partner nations could compel greater multilateral coordination, diminishing China’s economic, diplomatic, and military advantages. While even unprecedented unity among ASEAN and other regional blocs may not suffice to deter China entirely, it could incentivize the United States, Japan, Europe, and other nations to offer more robust, tangible support. Enhanced cohesion within ASEAN and the international community will exert pressure on Beijing to abide by global norms and international laws, lest China risk becoming an isolated pariah state.

⁷ Ray Powell and Benjamin Goirigolzarri, “Assertive Transparency: The Philippines’ Counter Gray Zone Innovation,” *SeaLight*, 7 October 2023, <https://www.sealight.live/>.

⁸ Brad Lendon and Kathleen Magramo, “International backlash grows after Chinese vessel fires water cannon on Philippine boats,” *CNN*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

⁹ Khanh Vu, “Vietnam, Philippines seal deals on South China Sea security,” *Reuters*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹⁰ Aadil Brar, “China Fumes as India Backs US Ally in Heated Territorial Dispute,” *Newsweek*, 27 March 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/>.

¹¹ Raymond M. Powell and Benjamin Goirigolzarri, *Game Changer: The Philippines’ Assertive Transparency Campaign Against China; How the Philippines Rewrote the Counter Gray Zone Playbook in 2023* (Manila: Stratbase ADRi Publications, 12 January 2024), <https://adrinstitute.org/>.

Countries on China's periphery will hesitate to confront Chinese encroachment and hostility without a clear demonstration from Washington that the United States will stand by them. Taking decisive action with the Philippines to shield their vessels from Chinese harassment would mark the initial stride in showcasing US resolve and dependability. This gesture will signal to partners that the United States deems their freedom of navigation and security significant enough to confront China, if necessary.

If the United States aims to be perceived as a steadfast ally in the region, it must effectively deter Chinese aggression and harassment. Thus far, Washington's rhetoric-heavy approach has fallen short in altering Beijing's behavior. Adopting a more assertive stance in the South China Sea will foster mutual trust and bolster confidence among regional partners and allies, while unequivocally demonstrating US resolve vis-à-vis China. ✪

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Protecting the Hemisphere

Safeguarding US Interests and Prioritizing Partnerships for a Stable Hemisphere

ALAN CUNNINGHAM

Abstract

Mexico holds a crucial position as one of the foremost trading partners and economic powerhouses for the United States in Central and Southern America. Given its proximity to the United States and its unwavering alliance from a security standpoint, Mexico plays a pivotal role in US foreign policy endeavors. However, the escalating levels of Chinese investment in the region pose a growing economic threat, endangering the standing of the United States. Consequently, it is imperative for Washington to prioritize efforts aimed at countering any potential economic competition that could prove detrimental in the context of Mexico.

Neighbors play a crucial role in geopolitics, offering opportunities for trade, collaborative security efforts, societal development, and the exchange of ideas, programs, and initiatives that benefit both nation-states. Collectively, these interactions can significantly enhance foreign nations and establish a formidable force in diplomatic engagements with other nations or during military conflicts. However, if relations with a neighboring nation are strained, stemming from various factors such as historical animosity or differences in political ideology, the bond between both nations can deteriorate, evolving into a larger geopolitical threat.

While the relationship between the United States and its southern neighbor Mexico is not inherently negative, it is beset by challenges that could potentially escalate over time. One emerging concern, posing a threat to the United States, is the evolving relationship between Mexico and China.

China and Mexico

The historical relationship between China and Mexico spans several decades. According to a February 2022 article from the China Daily, a newspaper owned and controlled by the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party, the mutually beneficial connection between China and Mexico originated “a few months

after the People's Republic of China (PRC) resumed its seat in the United Nations, with strong support from Mexico."¹

In 1971, Mexico voted for the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, recognizing Taiwan as "a part of the People's Republic of China" and granting the PRC permanent membership in the UN Security Council.² This naturally provoked anger among many Taiwanese and the Taiwanese government, leading to Mexico maintaining only unofficial relations with the Asian island.

Since the 2000s, China's relationship with Mexico has experienced substantial growth across economic, social, and security dimensions. The Asian nation's "rapid growth and resulting demand" have significantly contributed to Latin America's "subsequent commodities boom" through the importation of "higher-value-added manufactured products, a trade some experts say has undercut local industries with cheaper Chinese goods." In return, China benefits from Latin America, particularly in terms of "soybeans, copper, petroleum, oil, and other raw materials that the country needs to drive its industrial development."³

China has entered into multiple free-trade agreements with nations across Latin America and actively collaborates with the region to expand participation in its infrastructure investment and economic integration program, the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴ According to Tecma, a business advisory service based in El Paso focusing on US–Mexico relations, "China is Mexico's second largest trading partner . . . [with] Mexican integration with the US economy provides the perfect gateway for Chinese businesses to strengthen access to the US market."⁵ The trade volume reached "\$86.6 billion, marking a year-on-year increase of 41.9 percent,"⁶ according to the *Global Times*, another daily news source controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.

¹ Marcelo Ebrard Casaubon, "Mexico, China celebrate 50 years of friendship," *China Daily*, 14 February 2022, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

² Jessica Drun and Bonnie S. Glaser, "The Distortion of UN Resolution 2758 and Limits on Taiwan's Access to the United Nations," *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/>.

³ Diana Roy, "China's Growing Influence in Latin America," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 June 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

⁴ Jacob J. Lew et al., "China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/>; and Lucas Chiodi and Thu Nguyen Hoang Anh, "The Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America: How China Makes Friends and What This Means for the Region," *Latin American Focus Group* (blog), 18 March 2022, <https://blogs.eui.eu/>.

⁵ Toby Spoon, "China-Mexico Relations are Creating Mutual Opportunities," *Tecma*, 2016, <https://www.tecma.com/>.

⁶ "China-Mexico trade reaching \$86.6 billion in 2021: commerce ministry," *Global Times*, 17 February 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

Concurrently, in 2019, “Mexico displaced China as a main trade partner of the United States.”⁷ This shift underscores China’s increasing significance as a trading partner with Mexico, posing a potential threat to America’s economic development and national security interests.

How This Developing Relationship Threatens the United States

The substantial revival of economic cooperation between Mexico and China inherently poses a series of threats to the United States, extending beyond purely economic concerns.

Firstly, China’s deepening involvement in Mexico, as well as the broader Latin American region, is not solely driven by economic motives but extends to strategic considerations. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, an independent US-based think tank, “China’s focus on soft power . . . has helped Beijing build political goodwill with local governments and present itself as a viable alternative partner to the United States and European states.” This strategy contributes to the isolation of Taiwan on the global stage, boosts sales of Chinese small arms and military equipment, and supports authoritarian governments, including those in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.⁸

From a national security perspective, this presents a significant and grave threat. The United States, particularly under the Trump administration in recent years, has not aided its cause in this realm.⁹ This is notably exemplified by the release of the former Mexican Secretary of Defense on money laundering charges by the United States, with Mexico subsequently dropping these charges while presenting evidence of the Defense Minister’s cartel connections and claiming US-fabricated evidence.¹⁰ In addition to political and economic objectives, China has advocated its own solutions to anticorruption and poverty issues while getting involved in various projects led by the Mexican president, as highlighted by Roman Ortiz, the

⁷ Juan Carlos Gachúz Maya, “Mexico’s Trade Relationship with China in the Context of the United States-China Trade war,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 51, no. 1 (April 2022), <https://journals.sagepub.com/>.

⁸ Roy, “China’s Growing Influence in Latin America.”

⁹ Roman Ortiz, “Mexico, China & the US: A Changing Dynamic,” *America’s Quarterly*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/>.

¹⁰ Drazen Jorgic and Mark Hosenball, “In shock move, U.S. abandons drugs case against ex-Mexican defense minister,” *Reuters*, 17 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/>; Mary Beth Sheridan, “Mexico declines to prosecute ex-Defense Minister Cienfuegos on drug charges,” *Washington Post*, 15 January 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>; and Mark Stevenson and Christopher Sherman, “Mexico clears general, published US evidence against him,” *Associated Press*, 15 January 2021, <https://apnews.com/>.

owner of a political risk and analysis firm and former advisor to the Colombian minister of defense.¹¹

The increasing presence of China in Mexico poses a potential challenge to the comprehensive national and homeland security framework that the United States has been diligently developing since the early 2000s to address terrorist activities, international criminal enterprises, and illegal immigration. China could potentially offer training to Mexican soldiers for counterterrorism missions and exert influence on the collection, gathering, or utilization of intelligence against nonstate actors that pose a threat. Given China's deep involvement in Mexican organized criminal enterprises and illicit trafficking, this could have detrimental effects on the United States while actively benefiting China in both national security and economic terms.¹²

While the relationship is a cause for concern, it is essential to emphasize that China is not aiming to turn Mexico into a surrogate state. Instead, they would be engaging in competition against the United States, working similarly to enhance security resources against nonstate threats and counter threatening foreign powers. Nevertheless, this still presents a challenge to America's national security interests and has the potential to harm American security, further destabilizing relationships in Latin America.

These considerations highlight the imperative to prioritize the South, with a particular focus on Mexico. The Biden administration is already taking steps to re-prioritize US–Mexico relations and mend the strained connection. According to the Wilson Center, a public policy and research think tank, in 2021, Pres. Joe Biden “worked with Mexican counterparts to reconstruct the institutional framework for that economic relationship” while revitalizing the North American Leaders’ Summit and the High-Level Economic Dialogue which created “a framework and a channel for exploring new directions in the bilateral economic relationship, while at the same time, allowing for discussion of potentially thorny issues.”¹³

Conclusion

The escalating level of cooperation between Mexico and China raises legitimate concerns. It is noteworthy that many experts do not express serious concerns about

¹¹ Ortiz, “Mexico, China & the US: A Changing Dynamic.”

¹² Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The China connection in Mexico’s illegal economies,” *Brookings Institution*, 4 February 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/>; and Nathaniel Parish Flannery and Vande Felbab-Brown, “How is China involved in organized crime in Mexico?,” *Brookings Institution*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

¹³ Duncan Wood and Alexandra Helfgott, “Seeking Process and Predictability: An Evaluation of U.S.-Mexico Relations Under President Biden,” *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.

these Chinese investments completely displacing the United States as a trading partner.

Margaret Myers, the Director of the Asia and Latin America Program at the international affairs-oriented think tank Inter-American Dialogue, remarked, “Economic ties between the U.S. and Mexico are so profound that a slight increase in China-Mexico activity is not going to fundamentally change that dynamic.” She maintains that China could never replace the United States as a dominant or primary economic partner.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the United States should consistently strive to enhance its relations with neighbors, especially those with whom it values ongoing economic and security cooperation.

In an article for *America’s Quarterly*, Martha Bárcena Coqui, the former Mexican Ambassador to the United States from 2018 to 2021, discusses how the evolving relationship with China and the diminishing ties with the United States should prompt Mexican policymakers to reassess their perspectives. She writes:

China is the main competitor in the U.S. market for certain Mexican products. Is it feasible to substitute those U.S. imports from China with Mexican imports? If so, what is the best way to do this? And can Mexico substitute some of its imports from China with American or Latin American imports? . . . Mexico, China and the U.S. should work together to identify areas of trilateral and multilateral cooperation. The most obvious example is cooperation on climate change . . . Mexico’s economic competitiveness is directly linked to information technologies, one of the areas of fierce confrontation between the U.S. and China. Which 5G system Mexico adopts is one of the big issues to be defined.¹⁵

Mexico holds a strategic geographical, political, and economic position that could serve as a conduit to mend the deteriorating economic ties between the United States and China. Such cooperation would not only significantly benefit Mexico financially but also enable the nation to strengthen ties with two superpowers in various aspects. This collaborative approach aims to benefit the Mexican people and foster substantial growth in the Central American nation without either antagonizing or disregarding larger superpowers.

¹⁴ Cody Copeland, “Heightened US-China tensions present economic opportunities for Mexico,” *Courthouse News Service*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.courthousenews.com/>.

¹⁵ Martha Bárcena Coqui, “Why Mexico’s Relationship with China Is So Complicated,” *America’s Quarterly*, 28 September 2021, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/>.

Moving forward, the Mexican government must chart a “third way,” reminiscent of its stance during the global Cold War. In that era, Mexico “refused to align themselves either way in a bid to remain neutral . . . [neglecting] to join America’s bloc not because of ideological sympathy toward the Soviet communists, but because of its own sense of nationalist self-preservation.”¹⁶ By working with both the Soviet and American nation-states without seeking exclusive benefit like Somalia, Mexico successfully navigated political ideologies.¹⁷ This approach proved beneficial for the Latin American nation in the long run, contributing to economic, social, and political stability and preventing it from becoming a military hotspot or a victim of foreign interference by either the Soviet Union or the United States.

Ambassador Coqui concludes in her article, stating that “while the economic and foreign policy decisions that Mexico will adopt regarding China will also affect the U.S., a constant presence and partner, they will be based on its own national interest—on what is good for Mexico and the Mexicans . . . a confrontation between the U.S. and China will benefit neither Mexico nor its neighbors.”¹⁸

A confrontation would not be beneficial for anyone within the Western Hemisphere and is likely to exacerbate the deterioration of relations between the United States and China. Therefore, the United States and Mexico must collaborate to develop mutually beneficial economic and security cooperation that does not unfairly exclude China. Instead, the goal should be to benefit all three nation-states, fostering a stable and sustainable region. ★

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¹⁶ “Contradiction and Ambivalence: Mexico’s Cold War and the United States,” *Yale Review of International Studies*, December 2018, <http://yris.yira.org/>.

¹⁷ Emira Woods, “Somalia,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 1 January 1997, <https://fpif.org/>.

¹⁸ Coqui, “Why Mexico’s Relationship with China Is So Complicated.”

Navigating the Power Tides

Singapore's Diplomatic Dance with the United States and China

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Abstract

Recently, Indo-Pacific states have found themselves embroiled in a competition between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States for influence. Particularly concerning is the notable increase in military cooperation between long-standing US partner Singapore and the PRC. This article asserts, through a comprehensive analysis of Singaporean military cooperation with China and the United States, that Singapore's overwhelmingly positive relationship with the United States remains secure. Key leader engagements, joint military exercises, memorandums of understanding, and professional military exchanges will be the focus of this article's examination. Unlike other works on the subject, this article specifically employs a case study to scrutinize a US partner's susceptibility to Chinese influence. By illuminating these developments, the article offers insights pertinent to the US military as they strategize and implement their operations in the region alongside US partner forces.

Since 2014, countries in the Indo-Pacific have found themselves ensnared in a competition for influence between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States. This rings particularly true for the Republic of Singapore, a long-standing US partner that in recent years has faced substantial overtures from the PRC. Singapore has officially adopted a nonaligned approach toward the US-China great-power competition, characterized by its simultaneous pursuit of advantage and risk mitigation to balance its relationships.¹ Nonetheless, many commentators have suggested that Singapore's increasing military cooperation with the PRC signals a potential shift in strategic posture that could jeopardize the delicate balance of power in the region.²

¹ Koh Wan Ting, "Singapore-China Ties Upgraded, Relations," *Channel News Asia*, 1 April 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/>.

² Lan Yunzhou, "李显龙总理：新美合作紧密不代表我国将涉入美国的战争 (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong: Close cooperation between New Zealand and the United States does not mean that our country will get involved in the United States' war)," *Lianhe Zaobao*, 10 April 2022, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/>.

This article assesses the status of PRC–Singapore defense relations and explores the implications of their expanding military collaboration. Ultimately, by comparing Singaporean military cooperation with both China and the United States, the article contends that worries about Singapore succumbing to Chinese influence are exaggerated. Singapore’s exceptionally favorable relationship with the United States remains secure.

Various characteristics must be considered when assessing the strength of a military relationship between two nations. The article’s focus centers on key leader engagements, joint military exercises, memorandums of understanding (MOU), and other defense cooperation agreements, as well as professional military exchanges. While not exhaustive, as the Sino-Singaporean relationship remains relatively unexplored and both parties are notably reserved about their activities, these aspects provide critical insights. For instance, regarding defense technology coproduction and intelligence sharing, evidence of engagement is scarce, and discussions primarily rely on conjecture.

Both the frequency and substance of cooperative activities are pivotal in determining the overall strength of a relationship along each dimension. Infrequent actions and a lack of tangible results suggest a weaker relationship compared to frequent engagements yielding clear positive outcomes. Additionally, the scope and scale of such activities relative to a state’s engagements with other nations play a significant role in assessing a particular relationship’s relative importance. While individual activities may not offer substantial insights into military-to-military relations, a comprehensive analysis across time and space promises a more accurate portrayal.

Key Leader Engagement

The PRC and Singapore have engaged in frequent high-level leader meetings since 2017. That year, the Republic of Singapore and the PRC revitalized the Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation and Related Joint Steering Council Meetings (JCBC), reaffirming both countries’ “commitment to deepen defense ties.”³ In February 2018, the two defense ministers convened once more in Singapore, exchanging views on “regional security, the relationship between the two nations, as well as the defense cooperation between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).”⁴ Singapore held the rotating chair of ASEAN-China

³ “Singapore and China Reaffirm Commitment to Deepen Defence Ties” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 22 September 2017), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

⁴ “常万全与新加坡国防部长会谈 (Chang Wanquan Talks with Singapore Defence Minister)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 5 February 2018), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>.

relations and assumed the chair of ASEAN that year, providing significant opportunities for collaboration with China and representation of Southeast Asia as a whole.⁵ Throughout Singapore's tenure as dual-chair, China and Singapore engaged in frequent defense dialogues.⁶ Although precise details of these discussions are not readily available, these events signify a trend of heightened PRC–Singapore key leader engagement preceding the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, these interactions persisted within the cyber domain. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) conducted annual video conferences and phone calls discussing COVID-19 containment, regional security, and bilateral relations.⁷ Despite a reduction in the frequency of key leader engagements during the pandemic, communication between the Republic of Singapore and the PRC persisted. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the two nations resumed their regular meetings.⁸ However, despite their frequency, key leader engagements between Singapore and China remain superficial, with minimal commitments, often characterized by limited statements expressing wishes for “continuously healthy development between the two countries.”⁹

⁵ “第八次中国 - 东盟防长非正式会晤在新加坡举行 (The 8th China-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting was held in Singapore)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 7 February 2018), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>.

⁶ “魏凤和会见新加坡三军总长 (Wei Fenghe meets with Singapore's chief of services)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 5 September 2018), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>; “第五届东盟防长扩大大会在新加坡举行 (The fifth ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus was held in Singapore)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 20 October 2018), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>; “魏凤和会见新加坡客人 (Wei Fenghe meets with guests from Singapore)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 11 April 2019), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>; and “新加坡总理李显龙会见魏凤和 (Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong meets with Wei Fenghe)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 30 May 2019), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>.

⁷ “中国和新加坡军队召开新冠肺炎疫情防控经验分享视频会议 (The Chinese and Singaporean militaries held a video conference to share experience in COVID-19 prevention and control)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 9 April 2020), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>; “魏凤和同新加坡国防部长黄永宏通电话 (Wei Fenghe had a phone call with Singaporean Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 27 March 2020), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>; “魏凤和同新加坡国防部长视频通话 (Wei Fenghe held a video call with the Singaporean Defense Minister)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 8 June 2021), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>; and “中国和新加坡国防部举行第八次防务政策对话 (The Ministries of Defense of China and Singapore held the eighth defense policy dialogue)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 15 September 2021), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>.

⁸ “新加坡总理李显龙会见魏凤和 (Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong meets with Wei Fenghe)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 10 June 2022), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>; and “2022 年北京香山论坛专家视频会开幕 (2022 Beijing Xiangshan Forum Expert Video Conference Opens)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 1 December 2022), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>.

⁹ “魏凤和同新加坡国防部长视频通话 (Wei Fenghe held a video call with the Singaporean Defense Minister)” (press release, Ministry of National Defense, PRC, 8 June 2021), <http://www.mod.gov.cn/>.

On the other hand, Singapore's key leader engagements with the United States reinforce the two countries' enduring positive relations and occur with equal or greater frequency compared to those with China, with the most recent meeting taking place as recently as December 2023.¹⁰ While interactions between China and Singapore are limited to their respective defense ministers, Singapore's engagements with the United States involve heads of state from both nations meeting with defense officials and senior leaders from other departments to discuss how defense matters align within the broader cooperative framework between the two countries.¹¹

Furthermore, Singaporean and American defense officials engage in direct and transparent dialogue, consistently producing defense agreements and robust statements underscoring the significance both Singapore and the United States attribute to the relationship.¹² The meetings between the Singaporean Ministry of Defense and the Department of Defense are not incidental but rather institutionalized affairs that complement regular military-to-military exchanges, such as the Singapore–US Strategic Security Policy Dialogue, which convened for its twelfth iteration in 2022.¹³ Each meeting that Singapore holds with the United States is meticulously planned and serves a clear purpose, reflecting the depth of consideration and intent behind the engagement.

Military Exercises

Since 2009, there have been eight joint military training exercises between the PLA and SAF. The initial Army exercise aimed to enhance counterterrorism capabilities, with 61 soldiers from each country participating in simulated terrorist bomb attacks.¹⁴ Subsequent Army exercises also concentrated on counterterrorism, culminating in a significant urban counterterrorism training exercise in Singapore

¹⁰ "DOD Hosts Singapore Defense Minister for Security Discussions," *DOD News*, 6 December 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

¹¹ Tang See Kit, "Singapore and US reaffirm defence ties, agree importance of sustained engagement by Washington in Asia," *Channel News Asia*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/>; "Singapore and US Reaffirm Excellent and Long-standing Bilateral Defence Relations" (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 7 December 2023), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>; and "Singapore and US Strengthen Defence Relations through Strategic Security Policy Dialogue" (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 6 October 2022), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

¹² David Vergun, "U.S.-Singapore Partnership Central to Expanding Regional Security, Prosperity," *DOD News*, 3 November 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/>; and Davina Tham, "Singapore, US affirm 'vital' American presence in region as defence chiefs meet," *Channel News Asia*, 27 July 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/>.

¹³ "Singapore and US Strengthen Defence Relations through Strategic Security Policy Dialogue."

¹⁴ Xinhua, "China, Singapore hold joint anti-terror training exercises," *CCTV.com*, 19 June 2009, <https://english.cctv.com/>.

in 2023, involving approximately 120 soldiers from both nations—the largest such exercise between the two countries to date.¹⁵

Naval exercises between the two navies typically span no more than four days and involve only a small number of ships, focusing on fundamental gunnery and maneuver drills.¹⁶ The most recent naval exercise, named Maritime Cooperation 2023, occurred from 28 April to 1 May of that year.¹⁷ The two navies conducted a four-day exercise with four vessels within the Strait of Malacca, emphasizing naval defense.¹⁸

In contrast, from 2019 to 2023, Singapore has actively participated in annual large-scale military exercises with ASEAN and the United States. In May 2023, approximately 650 troops from both the US and Singapore engaged in the forty-second iteration of Exercise Tiger Balm.¹⁹ This two-week exercise represents the longest-standing bilateral exercise between the two countries, originating in 1981. From Exercise Forging Sabre to Red Flag and Cobra Gold, Singapore commemorates decades of defensive cooperation with the United States, signaling a steadfast commitment to this relationship.²⁰ Indeed, with Exercise Super Garuda Shield in 2022, Singapore demonstrated its readiness to engage in new training

¹⁵ “SAF and PLA to conduct JOINT Counter-Terrorism Training Exercise” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 19 November 2010), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>; Global Times, “新加坡军队赴大陆训练 台媒：对台挑衅意味甚浓 (Singaporean troops go to mainland China for training Taiwan media: Very provocative towards Taiwan),” *Huanqiu*, 5 November 2014, <https://mil.huanqiu.com/>; Lim Min Zhang, “Singapore, Chinese armies carry out urban raid in joint exercise,” *Straits Times*, 6 August 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/>; “SAF and PLA to Conduct Bilateral Exercise Cooperation 2023” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 28 August 2023), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>; and “In pictures: Singapore and China conduct joint military exercise,” *Channel Asia News*, 12 September 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/>.

¹⁶ “Singapore and Chinese Navies Conclude Inaugural Bilateral Naval Exercise” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 25 May 2015), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>; and “Republic of Singapore Navy Conducts Passage Exercise with the People’s Liberation Army Navy” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 22 September 2021), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

¹⁷ “扫雷舰亮相中新联合军演引关注 (Minesweeper’s appearance in China-Singapore joint military exercise attracts attention),” *Sohu*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.sohu.com/>.

¹⁸ Brian Waidelich and Patrick deGategno, eds., “China, Singapore Wrap Up Bilateral Maritime Exercise,” *PLA Update* 10 (17 May 2023): 2–3, <https://www.cna.org/>.

¹⁹ “650 army servicemen from Singapore, US conclude Exercise Tiger Balm in Hawaii,” *Straits Times*, 20 May 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/>.

²⁰ Joshua Allmaras, “Forging the Tip of the Spear,” 124th Fighter Wing, 27 September 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>; “RSAF Participates in Multilateral Air Combat Exercise Red Flag–Nellis” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 8 March 2022), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>; “SAF Concludes Participation in Multinational Exercise Cobra Gold 2023 in Thailand” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 11 March 2023), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>; and “Singapore and US Armies Mark 40th Edition of Exercise Tiger Balm” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 14 May 2021), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

events with US and partner forces.²¹ In contrast, Singapore's exercises with China are characterized by their small-scale and ad hoc nature, primarily serving to demonstrate Singapore's efforts to balance its relationships with both countries.

Available evidence indicates that the PLA and SAF do not engage in joint operations training exercises. Furthermore, the size and duration of the training exercises they do undertake are comparatively modest when contrasted with joint training exercises led by the United States in the region.²² While these training exercises signify a cordial relationship between the two militaries, they do not reach the level necessary for the formation of a cohesive joint force capable of conducting large-scale combat operations.

Defense Technology Coproduction

Based on the data collected from publicly available sources during this research, there is no indication of any coproduction of defense technology between Singapore and the PRC. Furthermore, there is no evidence of defense technology imports or exports between the two countries. The sole publicly available data on imports of defense technology from the Singaporean Ministry of Defense pertains to the procurement of F-35 aircraft and other weaponry from the United States. Given Singapore's transparency in disclosing its foreign defense technology acquisitions, the absence of evidence regarding Singaporean-PRC exchange of defense technology suggests that such activities are not occurring.

Defense Memorandum of Understanding and Agreements

As of July 2023, the sole accessible open-source data on defense MOUs between Singapore and the PRC relates to the agreement signed during the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2023. This MOU established a secure telephone link "for high-level communications" between the two Ministries of Defense.²³

This MOU emerged directly from the more substantial Enhanced Agreement on Defense Exchanges and Security Cooperation (ADESC) signed on 20 October 2019. This updated version of the ADESC builds upon the agreement initially signed in 2008, aiming to formalize defense cooperation between Singapore and the PRC. Indeed, discernible developments and implications within

²¹ "SAF Concludes Participation in Multilateral Exercise Super Garuda Shield 2022" (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 15 August 2022), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

²² Tom Abke, "Singapore, U.S. demonstrate military ties with Exercise Tiger Balm, other joint defense engagements," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, 27 May 2023, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/>.

²³ Syawalludin Zain and David Rising, "China and key US partner Singapore agree to top-level defense hotline," Associated Press, 1 June 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

the Singapore-PRC relationship have emerged following the signing of the enhanced ADESC.²⁴

While the scale and frequency of training exercises between Singapore and China experienced marginal increases, accommodating China with a mutual logistics support arrangement may potentially entail reducing services to the United States utilizing Changi Naval Base and other Singaporean military resources. Of particular significance are the academic exchanges among think tanks, given the close ties these institutions in both Singapore and China maintain with their respective governments. Particularly in the case of Singapore, these think tanks wield considerable influence in shaping discourse surrounding Southeast Asia.

Again, contrast these minimal engagements with the extensive scope of Singapore-US cooperation. Between 2021 and 2022, as Singapore's dialogue with China intensified, the Singapore signed an MOU with the United States concerning enhanced cyberspace defense cooperation, reaffirming "long-standing bilateral defense relations."²⁵ Additionally, approximately 25 percent of Singapore's combat aircraft are stationed in the United States.²⁶ In February 2023, the Singapore Ministry of Defense celebrated its acquisition of eight additional F-35B fighters from the United States.²⁷ Perhaps of greatest significance is the fact that "The largest number of foreign troops in the continental US are from Singapore."²⁸ The multifaceted agreements between Singapore and the United States demonstrate considerable depth, with billions in armament exports to Singapore over the years and consistent mutual support for the militaries of both countries.²⁹

²⁴ "Enhanced Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation (ADESC)" (fact sheet, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 20 October 2019), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

²⁵ "Singapore, US Enhance Defence Cooperation in Cyberspace" (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 23 August 2021), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>; and "Singapore and US Reaffirm Excellent and Long-standing Bilateral Defence Relations" (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 4 November 2021), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

²⁶ Harold C. Hutchison, "Let's talk about why a quarter of Singapore's air force is based in the US," *We Are the Mighty* (blog), 4 February 2020, <https://www.wearthemighty.com/>; and "Singapore and US Announce Basing of RSAF's F-16 and F-35B Fighter Training in the US" (press release, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 4 June 2021), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

²⁷ Thrina Tham, "MINDEF to Acquire Eight More F-35B Fighter Aircraft," *Pioneer*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

²⁸ David Scott, "Indo-Pacific Strategies for Singapore and Taiwan: Dealing with Major Powers," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 7 (November-December 2022), 91, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

²⁹ "Search for Singapore," Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2024, <https://www.dsca.mil/>; and "U.S. Security Cooperation With Singapore" (fact sheet, US Department of State, 12 April 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

Intelligence Exchange

Based on research from open-source materials, no evidence can be found regarding any form of intelligence exchanges between Singapore and the PRC. The only data uncovered related to intelligence exchange is a visit by Singapore's Security and Intelligence Division (SID) to the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) in November 2019.³⁰ The SID serves as Singapore's equivalent to the American Central Intelligence Agency, while CIIS is a professional research institute administered by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

However, China does engage in intelligence sharing with ASEAN for counterterrorism cooperation and maritime security operations.³¹ Although specific details are not disclosed regarding whether there exists a direct exchange of intelligence between Singapore and the PRC, this suggests a potential avenue for future intelligence exchange within the counterterrorism domain between the two countries.

Another noteworthy piece of information on this topic stems from a 2013 article alleging that Singapore plays a pivotal role in assisting the United States and Australia in tapping into undersea telecommunications links across Asia.³² However, since the source originates from an allegedly leaked document by former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, the accuracy of the source cannot be verified. Nevertheless, if Singapore were indeed collaborating with the "Five Eyes" intelligence countries, it would rationalize the PRC's reluctance to engage in direct intelligence exchanges with Singapore.

Professional Military Exchange

Professional military exchange typically involves the exchange of military officers to study at another country's command or staff college. The precise size and frequency of exchanges between Singapore and China are unclear, but it is likely that the level of exchange between the two nations is minimal. China's Naval University of Engineering includes Singapore as one of many stops for faculty and cadets aboard the Zhenghe Training Ship.³³ In 2009, the People's Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF) Command College introduced specialty courses for foreign of-

³⁰ "新加坡安全与情报局代表团访问我院 (A delegation from the Singapore Security and Intelligence Service visited our institute)," China Institute of International Studies, 28 November 2019, <https://m.ciis.org.cn/>.

³¹ Rommel C. Banlaoi, "Counterterrorism Cooperation between China, ASEAN, and Southeast Asian Countries," *China Review* 21, no. 4 (November 2021): 141–70, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

³² Philip Dorling, "Singapore, South Korea revealed as Five Eyes spying partners," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November 2013, <https://www.smh.com.au/>.

³³ Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions* (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020), 120, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

ficers and officers of the PLAAF.³⁴ These courses enrolled no more than 70 students, and there is evidence of only one Singaporean officer attending any of these classes.

The SAF directly benefits from a substantial amount of training and equipment provided by the United States.³⁵ In addition to extensive professional military exchange programs, such as command and staff colleges between the United States and Singapore, a notable number of SAF soldiers have completed training at US Army Airborne, Jumpmaster, and Pathfinder schools, as well as advanced courses such as the US Army Ranger school, Special Forces Qualification Course, and US Navy SEAL selection and training.³⁶ In comparison to the exchanges between Singapore and the United States, professional military exchanges between Singapore and the PRC are limited in number, scope, and scale.

Singapore's Motivation

Singapore maintains a closer alignment with the United States due to a lengthy history of defense cooperation. However, China represents a sizable and lucrative market that Singapore is hesitant to forgo by openly favoring the US. It is in Singapore's best interest for both powers to engage in cooperation. Choosing to side exclusively with the United States would lead to the Lion City forfeiting access to Chinese markets and investment, diverting these resources to Singapore's regional neighbors instead. Conversely, aligning solely with China would jeopardize the fundamental pillars of Singapore's national defense.

As a city-state reliant on commerce, Singapore stands to gain the most when it can engage in unrestricted trade and investment without compromising its security or being drawn into great-power competition. Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing echoed this sentiment, affirming, "We want to connect in the new domains—to embrace integration and write and re-write the rules to ensure that all parties can benefit. . . . Balkanization and formation of isolated blocs will make it difficult for us to achieve both," and stated that, "Great power rivalry and nativist politics have added isolationist pressure, threatening to reverse globalisation and the idea of cooperation and shared benefits. . . . The US-China trade tension has hurt the global economy."³⁷

The United States' revision of trade agreements from 2017 to 2021 coincided with domestic challenges. These factors, coupled with China's rapid economic and

³⁴ Allen and Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions*, 152–53.

³⁵ "Singapore and US Strengthen Defence Relations through Strategic Security Policy Dialogue."

³⁶ OurSingaporeArmy, "For Honour and Glory!," *YouTube*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

³⁷ "Speech by Minister Chan Chun Sing at the 6th International Maritime Security Conference Dinner (speech, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore, 15 May 2019), <https://www.mti.gov.sg/>.

industrial growth outpacing that of the West, prompted Singapore to enhance its ties with China. Minister for Defense Ng Eng Hen expressed Singapore's concerns about US foreign policy during a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, stating, "We can understand, even appreciate the underlying motivations but the implications are as troubling as they are unpredictable. . . . For the US, how does this shift to a new, more transactional foreign and security policy affect their acceptance by other nation states, friends, even allies?"³⁸

Ng questioned the extent to which the United States is prepared to assert its influence over China and highlighted the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a significant source of contention. He concluded by suggesting the repercussions of pressuring countries to align with one side or the other, stating, "Worse still is the situation where individual countries have to choose between the US or China. . . . That will be the ultimate losers' game and a race to diminishing benefits for all concerned."³⁹

To uphold neutrality and equilibrium between the great powers, Singapore refrains from aligning itself with the United States and, in certain instances, issues public statements challenging the United States. During a speech at the Reagan National Defense Forum in 2022, Dr. Ng urged the United States to "up its game in the economic sphere, whether it is in Asia or globally." He reiterated Singapore's disappointment with the United States' decision not to join the TPP and emphasized, "And I would think that China is too big to ignore as a market."⁴⁰

In the same year, Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong cautioned the United States that Singapore would not involve itself in any conflicts or disputes that the United States might become embroiled in. The Prime Minister also highlighted the TPP as a significant initiative for Singapore and a means to bolster the United States' credibility in the region, but lamented, "However, US domestic politics render that unfeasible." The heart of Singapore's grievances lies primarily in economic matters rather than defensive concerns. Singapore's gestures toward China serve to draw the attention of the United States.⁴¹

³⁸ "Speech by Minister for Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, at the 6th Plenary on 'Ensuring a Resilient and Stable Region'" (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 2 June 2019), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

³⁹ "Speech by Minister for Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, at the 6th Plenary."

⁴⁰ "Remarks by Minister for Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, for the "Our Strategic Advantage: Cooperation with Allies and Partners" at the Ninth Reagan National Defense Forum Panel on 4 December 2022" (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 4 December 2022), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

⁴¹ Lan, "李显龙总理."

Division between Singapore and the PRC

While the relationship between Singapore and the PRC seems relatively free of conflict, two notable points of contention arise: the SAF's Project Starlight in Taiwan and the United States' ability to utilize SAF Navy and Air Force bases in Singapore.

Project Starlight was initiated in 1975 when the newly independent Republic of Singapore sought a partner nation capable of providing training facilities for the SAF.⁴² Consequently, the SAF has dispatched up to 10,000 troops to Taiwan annually to conduct large-scale training exercises. This arrangement has been viewed as problematic by the PRC, and tensions between Singapore and China escalated in 2016 when nine SAF armored personnel carriers were seized by Hong Kong customs while returning from Taiwan.⁴³ Although the armored personnel carriers were eventually released, this matter remains unresolved as the training continues annually in Taiwan.⁴⁴

Another source of contention between the two countries is the ongoing presence and activities of the United States military in Singapore. For instance, the Changi Naval Base is utilized by the US Navy for logistical and resupply missions for both the Indian Ocean fleets and the Pacific fleets, with agreements for installation use being regularly renewed.⁴⁵

Although the Chinese Ministry of Defense has not explicitly stated its stance on the matter, numerous pro-CCP scholars and news outlets in China have depicted these renewals as a threat to the PRC. They argue that such actions will empower the United States to intimidate China in the South China Sea and jeopardize the PRC's maritime shipping.⁴⁶ Chinese commentary asserts that Singapore's cooperation in facilitating US Navy operations risks upsetting the fragile balance in the region and undermining existing cooperation between China and Singapore.

⁴² Ernest Z. Bower and Charles Freeman, "Singapore's Tightrope Walk On Taiwan," *Southeast Asia from the Corner of 18th & K Streets* 1, no. 26 (17 August 2010), <https://web.archive.org/>.

⁴³ Gabriel Yue, "China-Singapore Relations in Seizure," *Foreign Brief*, 30 November 2016, <https://www.foreignbrief.com/>.

⁴⁴ Kama Hsu and Eric Gau, "Singapore Troops Practice Parachute Jumps in Joint Exercises in Southern Taiwan," *Taiwan Plus*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.taiwanplus.com/>.

⁴⁵ "美续签防务协定·美可继续使用新加坡军事基地至2035年 (The United States and Singapore renew the defense agreement, and the United States can continue to use Singapore military bases until 2035)," *The Paper*, 24 September 2022, <https://m.thepaper.cn/>; and "Transcript: Cohen/Tan Press Briefing On U.S.-Singapore Relations," *USIS Washington File*, 10 November 1998, <https://web.archive.org/>.

⁴⁶ Ma Yao, "马尧：新加坡给美战舰开后门·脑袋被门夹了吧 (Singapore opened the back door for the US warship, and his head was caught in the door)," *Huanqiu*, 20 October 2016, <https://mil.huanqiu.com/>.

Implication

Regardless of Chinese overtures and pressure, the relationship between the United States and Singapore is overwhelmingly positive. Singapore's Ministry of Defence news releases cautiously approach the topic of a bilateral relationship with China, but on the other hand, significant coverage is given to the large scope of coordination and support that characterizes Singapore's ties to the United States.

Even amid the increase in exchanges with China, Dr. Ng reaffirms his country's favorable stance toward the United States, asserting that "the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region was vital and virtuous." Dr. Ng acknowledges in the same address that China's aspirations for growth and power are understandable given historical circumstances, but he concludes by questioning, "Will an industrialized and strong China be as benign to Southeast Asia as the US has been since 1945?"⁴⁷ Singapore's Minister of Foreign Affairs echoes Dr. Ng's perspective, affirming that "Singapore has never shied from publicly articulating the value of a continued and sustained American presence in our region; . . . [for] we have viewed America as a benign hegemon, a positive force for good and we have been a beneficiary of this presence."⁴⁸

The ongoing great-power rivalry between China and the United States has placed Singapore in a delicate position, unable to align definitively with either side. Singapore's optimal strategy is to act as a mediator between the two powers and promote cooperation to mitigate potential losses. There is no apprehension about the US losing Singapore; rather, Singapore seeks to avoid losing favor with both the United States and China. Should conflict erupt, Singapore would fail to achieve its stated objectives. Nonetheless, despite tensions, Singapore maintains a positive outlook on the situation. Traditional strong ties with the United States are complemented by widespread public belief in China's collaborative potential on the global stage.⁴⁹

However, Dr. Ng adopts a more cautious stance, remarking that "The temperature is not boiling, but certainly rising," but admits that "pre-positioning for deter-

⁴⁷ "Opening Remarks by Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen at the 12th Aspen Security Forum, on 4 November 2021 (Singapore Time) in Washington, D.C., US" (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 4 November 2021), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.

⁴⁸ "Edited Transcript of Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan's Remarks on "Seeking Opportunities Amidst Disruption—A View from Singapore" At the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 15 May 2019" (speech, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 16 May 2019), <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/>.

⁴⁹ Ma, "马尧：新加坡给美战舰开后门·脑袋被门夹了吧。"

rence is alive and well, but even then, the war drums have not started beating audibly.”⁵⁰

In this context, the United States Department of Defense has no reason to be concerned about Singapore’s relationship with the PRC. While Singapore may adopt a stance of balancing and hedging for security reasons, its bond with the United States remains exceptionally robust and is expected to endure, particularly given Singapore’s unequivocal support for the United States and its reserved approach toward China. 🌟

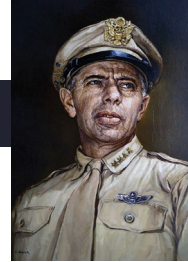
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⁵⁰ “Remarks by Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen at The Munich Security Conference (MSC) 2023 Maritime Security Roundtable on “Bridging Troubled Waters – Mapping Escalation Potential in the Indo-Pacific Region” on 18 February 2023” (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 18 February 2023), <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/>.



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