
RESEARCH ARTICLE

US Military Posture in the Asia-Pacific and its Impact on Regional Stability

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<i>Article Info</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
Keywords: <i>Asia-Pacific, South Asia, Regional Stability, Strategic Competition, China, United States</i>	<i>The geopolitics of Asia-Pacific are witnessing a transition. The regional powers calculate their bets as China rises as a key player and challenges the traditional dominance of the United States. The region hosts various flashpoints – in the wake of rising tensions, the US and China may redefine the power equilibrium, resulting in increased militarization and altering the region’s security environment. The evolving geopolitical dynamics thus characterize a power rivalry between these two powers. In pursuit of influence and supremacy, the US generates far-reaching consequences for regional stability. The involvement of the US in the region and the interests of regional stakeholders are closely connected with the US-China competition. This research paper analyzes this environment in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the multifaceted drivers shaping regional security dynamics. In addition, it highlights the complex network of alliances and military modernization efforts that are exacerbating the strategic equilibrium within the region. It also explores the complex maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas, highlighting the direct territorial and strategic stakes for both the US and China.</i>

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Introduction

After the termination of the Cold War, ideas about the “end of history”¹ surged in international politics as policymakers began forecasting the future path of the global system. A Western-led liberal system was upheld as the dominant creed, characterized by democracy and capitalism as critical elements in a unipolar world. However, in the following years, there was a gradual decline in the relative power of the US, coinciding with China’s resurgence as a significant global player, increasing its international influence. The US, due to its extended military engagements in the War on Terror (WoT) in Afghanistan following 9/11, as well as its subsequent roles in the conflict in Iraq and interventions in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, have strained the US financially, leading to trillions of dollars in military expenditures and war-related costs, stretched its military capabilities, and diverted attention from China’s peaceful rise and growing footprints in Asia-Pacific.

The US policymakers later recognized the importance of addressing the power gap in the Asia-Pacific and China’s growing regional influence. Consequently, in 2011, the Obama Administration introduced the “Pivot to Asia” policy. This marked a transition from military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan towards a more extensive strategic involvement in the Asia-Pacific, encompassing the contested South China Sea in its strategic considerations. This approach continued into the subsequent administration, but upon assuming office, President Donald Trump replaced it with the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) Strategy.

The primary aim of FOIP was to offset China’s increasing influence, economic power, and military expansion. However, Trump’s shift towards isolationism, exemplified by the policies of maximum pressure and blame games, raised doubts about the US capacity to function as the leading superpower in the world. Amidst the changing the power dynamics, with China’s growing economic footprint and US creating new alliances, there has been a new wave

¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, No. 16 (1989): 3–18.

of discourse about what the future holds for geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific.

China consistently focuses on enhancing its economic reach through connectivity and infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to expand its influence within its region and beyond. China's economic diplomacy is strengthening the economic potential of regional states, including Pakistan. On the other hand, the US is expanding its military influence by creating new security alliances strengthening its strategic partnerships with regional players, and establishing security-driven minilaterals and multilaterals as a counterweight to China. Thus, a power struggle between the two major forces engulfs the region, forcing regional states to choose between the two competing powers. The hedging strategy, long maintained by the regional countries, does not appear feasible in the present scenario due to the increasing military influence of the US on the one hand and the growing economic footprints of China on the other. Therefore, regional countries, notably weaker states, are compelled to enter the US-led bloc politics to secure their national interests. This approach may divide the region into two blocs, i.e., the pro-US and the anti-China blocs. This study addresses the primary question that how the perceived decline of US hegemony and the rise of China have influenced the geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific Region, and what implications does this have for regional states?

Current Geopolitical trends in Asia-Pacific

For the last twenty years, the Asia-Pacific Region has emerged as a crucial geopolitical theatre, with states like China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the US engaged in multidimensional engagements. Around the onset of this new century, the region has been witnessing a new race among states for power and influence. China's growing economic influence marks the essence of this competition as it gears up to become an economic superpower in the foreseeable future. The growing economic power of China has sparked apprehensions among other players in the region and beyond, particularly the US, prompting discussions on how to manage and contain China's expanding influence.

During the Cold War, the US initially adopted a “containment” strategy² to curtail the Soviet Union ambitions for expansion. Currently, the US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific are using a similar strategy to counter increasing Chinese influence in the region. Moreover, the transition in terminology from “Asia-Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific” in US foreign policy indicates the US ambition of creating broader strategic realignment in Asia in a ring of alliances against China and relying on India as a key regional actor on its behalf. The fundamental American interest is to adopt a new strategy of maximizing its gains by surrounding and isolating other apex predators. Interestingly, the region “is big enough to accommodate both countries and one country’s success is an opportunity for the other”³. Against no alliances, the US has created an axis of partners to contain China and Russia by transferring the major chunk of the effort to others in a ring of alliances, military bases, and economic partnerships.

The implementation of the strategy of containment in the Asia-Pacific region involves diverse tactics. One strategy involves strengthening current alliances and establishing new partnerships. The US maintains formal axis with Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and the Philippines, to offset China’s military strength. Moreover, efforts are underway to strengthen partnerships with India, Vietnam, and Indonesia, all of which harbor concerns about expanding Chinese influence in the region. In the last two decades, prominent alliances have emerged, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS (a trilateral security pact between Australia, UK and the US, established in 2021). In addition, collaborative efforts with regional organizations like the ASEAN are also in progress to maintain a “rules-based order” and halt China from using its economic strength to influence smaller regional countries.

² Kennan and Containment, 1947," Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian, accessed November 12, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan>.

³ William Yang. "Analysts: China Prioritizes De-escalation With US Through Xi-Biden Meeting." *VOA News*, November 16, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-china-prioritizes-de-escalation-with-us-through-xi-bidenmeeting/7357624.html>.

Military measures are an alternative method of controlling China. The US has increased its military footprints in the region, stationing additional ships, aircraft, and personnel. It has established multiple military bases in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, the most prominent and operational ones are the Diego Garcia⁴ in the Indian Ocean and the Hawaii Islands⁵ in the Pacific Ocean. Diego Garcia was forcibly depopulated in the 1970s under the rule of an illegitimate occupier, the British Indian government, transforming it into a naval base for the US. This site has emerged as a vital US military base, accommodating over 200 active staff, two runways for bombers, thirty naval vessels, infrastructure for nuclear missile-equipped submarines (SSBN), and a satellite monitoring facility. The island has also served as the launch point for bombing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, the US has participated in combined military exercises with regional allies to improve their military skills and collaboration. Efforts to fortify missile defense systems in the region are also in progress to counter the advancing missile capabilities of China⁶.

Involvement of the US and other Regional States

Considering the increasing importance of the Asia-Pacific and South Asia, the former US President Barack Obama initiated a new strategy in November 2011, the “Pivot to Asia.”⁷ This strategy focused on strengthening economic, diplomatic, political, and security relationships in the region, encompassing both bilateral and multilateral engagements. It reassured US allies and addressed concerns that the US commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq were training its resources; the Asia policy later transformed into

⁴ Greg Barton. "Diego Garcia: A Militarized Island in the Indian Ocean." *The Funambulist Magazine*, January 2, 2017. <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/09islands/diego-garcia-militarized-island-indian-ocean-greg-barton>.

⁵ “Oahu Hawaii Military Bases | Military.Com.” Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.military.com/base-guide/oahu-hawaii-military-bases>.

⁶ Pairman Bazai, "The Geopolitics of Asia-Pacific: Containment of China," *The Geopolitics*, April 24, 2023, <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-geopolitics-of-asia-pacific-containment-of-china/>.

⁷ Kenneth G. Lieberthal. “The American Pivot to Asia, *Brookings*.” Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

“rebalancing” strategy. This shift signified a reduction in military presence in the Middle East and other areas while increasing US investments and engagements in Asia-Pacific. This policy referred to as “rebalance to Asia” by reaffirming the US commitment to the region and highlighting the importance of Asia-Pacific in global politics. The Biden administration has continued and strengthened the policy.

The “Pivot to Asia” is perceived as a strategic move by the US to return to its pre-9/11 foreign policy, with increased attention on China. Despite Obama’s Administration assertions, China saw the Pivot differently, and viewed it as a disconcerting policy that had the potential to encourage other regional countries to assert their territorial claims against Beijing, indirectly seeking assistance from the US to address their issues. Resultantly, the Chinese predominantly perceived it as a strategy intended to curb the growing China’s influence in the Asia-Pacific Region⁸.

The approach of President Trump towards foreign policy and strategy represented a significant shift from the policies pursued during the Obama administration, also leading to questions about the uniformity of the US policy towards this region. Nonetheless, the US maintains substantial economic and security connections in the region, thereby maintaining its regional dominance. Meanwhile, President Biden’s Administration has underscored the importance of multilateralism by strengthening alliances and partnerships⁹.

Other regional states, such as Japan and comparatively far-away India, have exhibited increased proactiveness, contributing to the growing complexity of the geopolitical landscape. India’s “Eastern Engagement Strategy” and Japan’s push for a “Free and

⁸ Mohammad Tehseen. “Sino-US Competition: Implications for South Asia and the Asia-Pacific.” *Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI)*, Islamabad, January 11, 2020. https://issi.org.pk/wpcontent/uploads/2018/01/ISS_Mohammad_Tehseen_No-4_2017.pdf.

⁹ Greg Myre, "Long Promised and Often Delayed, the 'pivot to Asia' Takes Shape under Biden," NPR, October 6, 2021, *National Security*, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/06/1043329242/long-promised-and-often-delayed-the-pivot-to-asiatakes-shape-under-biden>.

Open Indo-Pacific”¹⁰ reflect their deepening involvement in the region. These policies are motivated by responses to the actions of China or the US and are driven by the strategic and economic interests of these states. One example is the trade volume between India and the Southeast Asian Region that surpassed \$110 billion, with the US reaching \$126 billion, and Japan ranking as one of the ASEAN’s top trading partners, commanding a share of 9.83% in 2022¹¹.

Economic Interdependence

The complex network of trade relationships strengthened by trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)¹² has increased the economic interdependence among the Asia-Pacific states. Signed by 15 regional states, this cooperative agreement undeniably served as a catalyst for economic growth, promoting closer ties and mutual prosperity among member states. The RCEP constitutes the world’s largest free trade zone, covering around 30% of the global population (2.2 billion people) and accounting for 30% of the global GDP (\$29.7 trillion), as well as 31% of worldwide Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows, presenting unparalleled opportunities for trade and investment.¹³ Nevertheless, this interdependence comes with inherent risks. The shared prosperity may be jeopardized by the economic disturbances in any member state, and the intertwined economies could potentially be exploited for political advantage. Vulnerabilities may emerge, particularly for smaller economies, which might face coercion from larger, more dominant players.

Technological Competition

¹⁰ "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, June 6, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html.

¹¹ "ASEAN | Imports and Exports | World | ALL COMMODITIES | Value (US\$) and Value Growth, YoY (%) | 2013 - 2021," *Trendeconomy*, May 14, 2023, <https://trendeconomy.com/data/h2/ASEAN/TOTAL>.

¹² "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership," <https://rcepsec.org/>.

¹³ "RCEP Agreement Enters into Force." ASEAN Main Portal, December 31, 2021. <https://asean.org/rcep-agreement-enters-into-force/>.

The Asia-Pacific region has become a major theatre for technological competition, particularly between the US and China¹⁴. This competition encompasses a range of domains like 5G technology, artificial intelligence (AI), drones, hypersonic weapons, and cybersecurity, impacting geopolitics, alliances, economies, and the digital future. It helps shape the state's economic prospects, exerts influence over alliances, and defines the contours of the future digital order. The dispute over 5G technology has resulted in network providers struggling to make decisions amid security concerns and economic considerations. The rivalry within the realms of AI and cybersecurity is similarly intense, with the potential for a shifting balance of power.

Defense Alliances and Military Modernization

Another key strategy in the Asia-Pacific region involves the establishment and fortification of defense-based alliances. In reaction to the so-called shifting power dynamics and Chinese influence, the US has formed the Quad¹⁵ as a strategic measure against the potential rise of China in the Asia-Pacific region. This alliance represents a shared commitment to security to address the perceived security challenges, also highlighting strategic alliances and partnerships. Although it is being dubbed as an "Asian NATO," the Quad falls short of becoming a military alliance like NATO. Instead, it extends its focus to broader domains, including technology, infrastructure, and climate change, transcending traditional military considerations¹⁶.

¹⁴ Graham Allison, Kevin Klyman, Karina Barbesino, and Hugo Yen. "The Great Tech Rivalry: China vs the U.S." Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, December 7, 2021. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/great-tech-rivalry-china-vs-us>.

¹⁵ "What Is the Quad, and How Did It Come About?" *The Guardian*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/24/what-is-the-quad-and-how-did-it-come-about>.

¹⁶ Mahima Duggal, "Quad as Asian NATO: A Practical Proposition?" in *Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Jagannath P. Panda (Routledge, 2022), 103–119.

The ongoing military modernization has emerged as an additional significant factor in the Asia-Pacific¹⁷. Notwithstanding the thriving economic and trade linkages throughout the region, China, Japan, Australia, South Korea, North Korea, India, and the ASEAN members are investing heavily in developing advanced military capabilities to enhance their strategic interests and security postures¹⁸. They are upgrading their military infrastructure, reinforcing their force structure, and allocating increased budgets to defense, all in a concerted effort to uphold a balanced regional military equilibrium.

Whether it is an action or a reaction to evolving regional dynamics, China is investing in military modernization and technology. In 2015, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) unveiled a comprehensive series of reforms for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), constituting the most far-reaching transformation in its history¹⁹. These reforms were aligned with President Xi Jinping's vision of a more modernized and technologically advanced military. China is estimated to have spent \$292 billion in new technologies in 2022 with a focus on developing advanced capabilities across all domains, including space, cyber, and AI²⁰, Japan is a strong US ally and is on a proactive trajectory. Japan increased its defense budget to strengthen its security posture in reaction to perceived threats from Russia, China, and North Korea. In 2023, Japan's defense budget was increased by 25% to the sum of \$52 billion.

¹⁷ Iraj Roudgar. "New Military Modernization in the Asia-Pacific Region." *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (May 28, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3232756>.

¹⁸ "Game Play in the Indo-Pacific: Many Players, Strategic Interests, and Common Challenges", *Air University (AU) Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs Article Display*. Accessed November 6, 2023. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3285742/game-play-in-the-indo-pacific-many-players-strategic-interests-and-common-chall/>.

¹⁹ Richard McGregor "The Chinese Communist Party: 100 Years That Shook the World." *The Guardian*, June 27, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/27/the-chinese-communist-party-100-years-that-shook-the-world>.

²⁰ "World Military Expenditure Reaches New Record High as European Spending Surges" *SIPRI*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/news/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges-0>.

Although India has least direct stakes in the Asia-Pacific likely configuration, it has been investing heavily in military modernization. These efforts primarily focus on building an integrated, network-centric force capable of operating in a joint-service environment. India allocated an estimated \$81.4 billion, making it the fourth-largest global defense spender²¹. It has been investing significantly towards the advancement of military technologies, including missile defense systems, fourth and fifth-generation fighter jets, and unmanned aerial vehicles, showcasing a strong commitment to staying at the forefront of military innovation²². Australia has enhanced its military capabilities by modernizing defense spending, advancing military technology, and expanding its naval power. These initiatives aim to safeguard maritime interests and maintain regional stability. The projected defense budget for 2022-2023 is a substantial \$30.7 billion, highlighting Australia's commitment to strengthening its national defense²³.

South Korea has adopted a thorough approach to enhancing its military capabilities by significantly investing in military technologies. It has undertaken initiatives to modernize its military force structure and naval capacities and allocate resources for missile defense system to counter potential threats from North Korea effectively²⁴. North Korea remains under sanctions but has persistently invested in military modernization, including advanced

²¹ "World Military Expenditure Reaches New Record High as European Spending Surges" *SIPRI*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/news/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges-0>.

²² Kartik Bommakanti, Yogesh Joshi, Shimona Mohan, Karthik Nachiappan, and Antara Vats, "Emerging Technologies and India's Defence Preparedness," ORF Special Report No. 209 (April 2023) <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20240510151332.pdf>.

²³ Julian Kerr and Andrew MacDonald, "Australia Proposes Defence Spending Boost for 2023," *Janes*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/australia-proposes-defence-spending-boost-for-2023>.

²⁴ Gabriel Dominguez and Mark Cazalet, "South Korea to Deploy Rail-Mounted Robot, AI-Based Surveillance Systems to Enhance Border Security," *Janes*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/south-korea-to-deploy-rail-mounted-robot-ai-based-surveillance-systems-to-enhance-border-security>.

missile technologies, nuclear weapons, and cyber capabilities. In 2022, its defense spending stood at around 33% of its GDP²⁵.

ASEAN member states, particularly Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, have been increasing their defense budgets, aiming to enhance their military capabilities.²⁶ These states have been investing in the development of advanced military technologies, expanding their naval capabilities, and enhancing their joint-service operations to maintain their regional military balance. In 2022, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)²⁷ report noted a 2.7% increase in military spending in the Asia-Pacific, compared to 2021. In 2022, the milestone of exceeding \$2240 billion in global military expenditure was attributed to the rise in military spending in the Asia-Pacific region²⁸.

Maritime Disputes

The primary strategic issue in the Asia-Pacific revolves around maritime disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, which serves as a vital passage for one-third of international maritime trade.²⁹ The likelihood of conflict has increased due to territorial disputes. The South China Sea is shared by China and some Southeast Asian states. Several territorial standoffs in this area have driven realignments affecting their foreign policies and reshaping the overall geopolitical balance.

²⁵ Kim Tong-Hyung. "North Korea Passes New Defense Budget." Defense News, January 19, 2023. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2023/01/19/north-korea-passes-new-defense-budget/>

²⁶ Gurjit Singh, "Military Expansion among ASEAN Members," Observer Research Foundation, August 23, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expertspeak/military-expansion-among-asean-members/>.

²⁷ "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022" SIPRI. Accessed November 6, 2023. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2023/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-worldmilitary-expenditure-2022>.

²⁸ 'World Military Expenditure Reaches New Record High as European Spending Surges', SIPRI, April 24, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/news/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges-0>.

²⁹ "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" *ChinaPower Project*, August 2, 2017. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-chinasea/>.

Vietnam and the Philippines have sought to balance their relations with China and the US, a maneuvering strategy that has significant consequences for regional stability. However, multiple states' military installations within the contested maritime zones have escalated tensions. For example, Vietnam has embarked on significantly enhancing dredging and land reclamation activities at various South China Sea outposts, indicating its intent to reinforce its claims in the contested maritime region.

Similarly, Philippines has escalated its military presence by carrying out regular patrols and vigilantly tracking Chinese actions in the region.³⁰ Japan has been actively involved in the construction of military bases and deploying modern firepower, including mobile anti-ship missile batteries in the region³¹.

Involvement in territorial disputes with Japan, especially regarding the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, has also been seen from the Chinese lens. This situation has been further complicated by the execution of the US operations to ensure navigational freedoms, opposing China's claim to the disputed islands within the South China Sea³². These developments have led to heightened tensions and a surge in military activities in the South China Sea, causing concern among many states within the region and beyond.

US Military Doctrine and Military Posture

³⁰ Limpot, Kristel. "PH to Boost Military Presence in West PH Sea amid Chinese Activities," *CNN*, December 22, 2022. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/12/22/ph-boost-military-presence-west-ph-sea.html>.

³¹ Tim Kelly, and Sakura Murakami. "Pacifist Japan Unveils Biggest Military Build-up since World War Two," *Reuters*, December 17, 2022. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pacifist-japan-unveils-unprecedented-320-bln-military-build-up-2022-12-16/>.

³² "DoD Releases Fiscal Year 2022 Freedom of Navigation Report." U.S. Department of Defense, April 21, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3370607/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2022-freedom-of-navigation-report/2023>. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3370607/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2022-freedom-of-navigation-report/>

The 9/11 events had a profound impact on the US military doctrine, shifting its focus towards counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. Notably, “Effects-Based Operations” and “Irregular Warfare” gained prominence, prioritizing comprehensive strategies to combat asymmetric threats. The “Joint Operational Access Concept” was developed with the objective of preserving freedom of action. Nevertheless, the present doctrine places a heightened emphasis on collaboration, integration, and effective operation in contested environments through the concept of “Multi-Domain Operations.” This approach is designed to tackle intricate challenges, particularly amidst geopolitical tensions with China and Russia.

In response to China’s rise, seen as a potential challenge to its global standing, the US with its long-established military presence has been adjusting its strategic stance in the region. The US military posture is centered on preserving regional dominance, assuring the allies’ security, and deterring potential threats. This underscores America’s persistent efforts to maintain its position as a superpower while containing China’s rising influence in the region, driven by its economic and geopolitical interests. The US has been actively reinforcing military alliances and partnerships to achieve these goals and solidifying its position as a pivotal player. Assessing the US military posture is critical to analyzing the impact of these strategic partnerships and evolving US military posture on regional stability.

Force Structure and Equipment

The US force structure and equipment form the bedrock of its military might, ensure readiness and capabilities for any global challenge. The constantly evolving and modernizing force structure reflects the state’s commitment to security and defense. It includes the army,³³ marine corps, navy, air force, space force and coast guard.

The US Army is the largest branch of the US military, with a \$185.5 billion annual budget and over one million soldiers. It

³³ "The U.S. Military's Force Structure: A Primer, 2021 Update." Congressional Budget Office, May 20, 2021. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57088>

maintains around 5,500 main battle tanks, the highest number among NATO members in 2023, equipped with advanced fire control technology for precision ground operations. The US Navy, one of the world's largest, has 285 battle force ships, approximately 343,223 active-duty personnel, 57,632 reservists, and civilians. The fleet includes 11 aircraft carriers, guided-missile destroyers, cruisers, submarines, and amphibious assault ships, known for advanced radar, missile defense, and long-range strike capabilities, emphasizing its ability in power projection, sea control, and maritime security.

The US Air Force (USAF), one of the world's largest air forces, has 323,400 active-duty members, 70,000 reservists, and civilians,³⁴ with a FY 2024 budget request of around \$215.1 billion.³⁵ Its versatile fleet includes fighter jets (F-15, F-16, F-22, F-35),³⁶ strategic bombers (B-1B, B-2, B-52),³⁷ cargo planes, tankers, surveillance aircraft, drones, and satellites. The primary responsibilities consist of establishing superiority in air and space, conducting worldwide intelligence gathering and surveillance (ISR), ensuring quick movement, carrying out global strikes, and overseeing command and control (C2).

The United States Marine Corps (USMC), a branch of the US Armed Forces that conducts amphibious operations with about 179,000 active-duty marines and 35,240 reservists, has a budget of

³⁴"Department of the Air Force, FY 2023 Budget Overview," U.S. Department of Defense, 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964733/-1/1/1/FY%202023%20DAF%20BUDGET.PDF>

³⁵Audery Decker, "R&D Tops Procurement in Air Force's 2024 Budget Proposal." *Defense One*, March 13, 2023. <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2023/03/rd-tops-procurement-air-forces-2024-budget-proposal/383897/>.

³⁶"50 United States Fighter Jets: F-15, F-16, F-22, F-35, F/A-18." Accessed November 5, 2023. http://www.worldwidemilitary.com/Military%20Aircraft/US%20Fighters/USFighters_EN.htm.

³⁷"B-52H Stratofortress." Air Force. Accessed November 5, 2023. <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104465/b-52hstratofortress/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.af.mil%2FAbout-Us%2FFactSheets%2FDisplay%2FArticle%2F104465%2Fb-52h-stratofortress%2F>.

\$53.2 billion³⁸. Specializing in amphibious assaults, raids, and rapid response, it operates as part of the Department of the Navy. However, it has distinct capabilities, comprising ground combat, aviation, and logistical units. The United States Space Force (USSF), established in 2019, is the newest US military branch responsible for space operations. It manages space assets critical for communication, reconnaissance, and navigation while ensuring the security of US space assets. It supports eight key space missions³⁹ and operates with around 77 spacecraft,⁴⁰ a \$30 billion budget request for FY 2024, and about 8,600 personnel, including military personnel. In its relentless pursuit of technological superiority, the US military is heavily investing in research and development, with a record-high budget request of over \$130.1 billion for FY 2023.⁴¹ The key areas include artificial intelligence, hypersonic and directed energy weapons, autonomous systems, and space technology to enhance readiness and dominance.

Network of US Alliances and Strategic Partnerships

The US relies on its Asia-Pacific alliances and partnerships, as highlighted in its National Defense Strategy of 2022. The US aims to strengthen existing alliances, form new partnerships, and increase regional engagement as a deterrent to China.⁴² Under this framework, the US maintains a powerful presence in the Western part of the Pacific Ocean via the Indo-Pacific Command

³⁸Irene Loewenson, “Corps Plans to Spend More Money on Retaining, Training Marines.” *Marine Times*, March 14, 2023. <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2023/03/13/corps-plans-to-spend-more-money-on-retaining-training-marines/>.

³⁹ “United States Space Force Mission.” Accessed November 6, 2023. <https://www.spaceforce.mil/About-Us/About-Space-Force/Mission/>.

⁴⁰ US DoD. “US Space Force.” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, last modified June 2020. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2020/06/Spaceforce.pdf>.

US DoD, “US Space Force,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, last modified June 2020, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2020/06/Spaceforce.pdf>.

⁴¹ “The Department of Defense Releases the President’s Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Budget.” U.S. Department of Defense, March 28, 2022. <https://shorturl.at/hjKM2>.

⁴² “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy.” U.S. Department of Defense, last modified, 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>.

(INDOPACOM),⁴³ a military command with a whopping demand of \$15 billion annual budget this year, responsible for regional operations and security. Additionally, the US military base in Guam plays a pivotal role as a strategic hub for regional operations⁴⁴.

Under the Mutual Defense Treaty with Japan, the US stations approximately 54,000 troops in Japan, focusing jointly on countering threats from China and North Korea⁴⁵. A similar security partnership exists with South Korea under the US-Republic of Korea Mutual Defense Treaty, further reinforced in April 2023 by the “Washington Declaration” to address North Korea’s nuclear threat and establish a Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), raising concerns for China regarding regional security implications.⁴⁶The US has extensive defense cooperation in the region with Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Through the AUKUS⁴⁷ partnership with the UK and Australia, the US invested \$394 billion in nuclear-powered submarines⁴⁸. The Philippines' defense capabilities are enhanced by the Mutual Defense Treaty, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, counterterrorism efforts, and maritime security measures such as joint exercises and potential reopening of naval bases. Thailand, has been a major non-NATO ally since

⁴³ "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command > About USINDOPACOM > USPACOM Area of Responsibility." PACOM, <https://www.pacom.mil/AboutUSINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>.

⁴⁴ Justin Katz. “US Indo-Pacific Command Seeks \$15.3 Billion in New, Independent Budget Request.” *Breaking Defense*, March 9, 2023. <https://breakingdefense.sites.breakingmedia.com/2023/03/us-indo-pacificcomm-and-seeks-15-3-billion-in-new-independent-budget-request/>.

⁴⁵ “The U.S.-Japan Alliance. 10 January, 2008 Congressional Research Service reports, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL33740.html>.

⁴⁶ “Washington Declaration.” The White House, April 26, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statementsreleases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/>.

⁴⁷ “AUKUS: The Trilateral Security Partnership Between Australia, UK, and US.” US Department of Defense. September 15, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/AUKUS/>.

⁴⁸ “Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of the Philippines and the United States of America, August 30, 1951.” Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, August 30, 1951. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1951/08/30/mutual-defense-treaty-between-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the-united-states-of-america-august-30-1951/>.

2003,⁴⁹ enjoys a robust security partnership with the US, including exercises like Cobra Gold and F-16 fighter jet provisions for the Thai Air Forces⁵⁰.

The visit of Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in 2022 heightened tensions over Taiwan, a persistent potential flashpoint in the conflictual US-China relationship⁵¹. The US acknowledges Chinese “One China” position. However, to counter China’s legitimate claim concerning Taiwan, the US maintains a robust presence in the South China Sea through the regular conduct of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). The US justifies FONOPs to uphold international law and ensure freedom of navigation in the contested waters. In contrast, China strongly protests these FONOPs as provocations and threats to its sovereignty and security.

Furthermore, there is a recent proposal in the US Senate to formally designate Taiwan as a major non-NATO ally (MNNA),⁵² despite previous legislation already granting certain privileges associated with MNNA status without a formal designation⁵³. This move underscores the growing US support for Taiwan and will add to regional tensions. Another regional actor, New Zealand, is a major US non-NATO ally and enjoys a considerable defense and security cooperation partnership. New Zealand’s membership in the

⁴⁹“The United States-Thailand Relationship.” United States Department of State, July 7, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-thailand-relationship/>.

⁵⁰Thomas Parks, Anucha Chintakanond, John Brandon, Benjamin Zawacki, and Alexandra Matthews. The Future of Thai-U.S. Relations: Views of Thai and American Leaders on the Bilateral Relationship and Ways Forward. White Paper. Project to Strengthen Relations between Thailand and the United States. The Asia Foundation, August 2018. <https://asiafoundation.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/08/The-Future-of-Thai-U.S.-Relations.pdf>.

⁵¹ Jeremy Herb, and Eric Cheung. “US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi Lands in Taiwan amid Threats of Chinese Retaliation,” *CNN*, August 2, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/02/politics/nancy-pelosi-visit-taipei-taiwan-trip/index.html>.

⁵² “US Senate Advances Bill to Significantly Expand Taiwan Support,” *Al Jazeera*, September 15, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/15/us-senate-advances-bill-to-significantly-expand-taiwan-support>.

⁵³“22 USC 2321k: Designation of Major Non-NATO Allies.” Accessed November 5, 2023. [https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=\(title:22%20section:2321k%20edition:prelim\)](https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=(title:22%20section:2321k%20edition:prelim))

Five Eyes intelligence alliance⁵⁴ underscores a strong intelligence collaboration. The US Pacific Island Strategy seeks to enhance the capabilities of its regional allies to counterbalance China's influence.⁵⁵ However, any attempt to create blocs in the region will be counterproductive for regional peace and stability.

The US-India strategic partnership is strengthening through more defense collaboration, information sharing, and joint military exercises. Despite a weak contribution by India to regional development and US security pursuits, the latter seeks to enhance India's regional security role, particularly for countering China. For this purpose, the partnership will allow India advanced weaponry, military drills, intelligence exchange, logistics support, and technology cooperation⁵⁶. Yet, these initiatives would impact power balance and regional stability, spilling over to the greater region, including South Asia. The Quad aims to enhance regional security and a "free Indo-Pacific," but it faces immense criticism for its discriminatory approach, which would fuel security dilemmas for regional states such as Pakistan.

Impact on the Asia-Pacific Region

Asia-Pacific enjoys a mix of economic and trade linkages as well as security-based arrangements. However, any uncontrolled pursuit of military advancement and power-enhancing attempts will disturb this region's stability – the so-called Indo-Pacific strategy can be one example, which may fuel unpredictability and insecurity for

⁵⁴ Hanna, Jason. "What Is the Five Eyes Intelligence Pact?", *CNN*, May 25, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/25/world/uk-us-five-eyes-intelligenceexplainer/index.html>.

⁵⁵ The White House. "FACT SHEET: President Biden Unveils First-Ever Pacific Partnership Strategy." The White House, September 29, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/fact-sheet-president-biden-unveils-first-ever-pacific-partnership-strategy/>.

⁵⁶ The White House. "FACT SHEET: United States and India Elevate Strategic Partnership with the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET)." The White House, January 31, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/31/fact-sheet-united-states-and-india-elevate-strategic-partnership-with-the-initiative-on-critical-and-emerging-technology-icet/>.

regional states. Any of such plans must not endanger the delicate power of balance. Any destabilizing act will heighten tensions between the two potential actors, the US and China, which may escalate the risk of a catastrophic conflict and entangle states in a complex web of security dilemma and arms race with significant global repercussions.

The US increased military presence in Asia-Pacific, the formation of new partnerships, and engagements through joint military ventures and exercises reflect an assertive approach towards China. Such measures will only cause mistrust and suspicion among regional players. Increased US-China tensions seem inevitable on some level as China establishes itself as a stable global actor. It will also instigate advancements in China's military capabilities, prompting a US response, making it a cyclic issue.

All states involved in Asia-pacific geopolitics can learn from the circumstances in Europe before 1914. No military victory by either China or the US can outweigh the strategic cost of a confrontation, even if it does not escalate to a full-scale conflict. Any crisis or conflict that triggers an arms race between China and the US will incur more significant cost than achieving a semblance of compromise and stability. The expenses of any major conflict would outweigh the gains for the "victor." In game theory, the most advantageous strategy is to abstain from the game entirely, and competition should be balanced by cooperation.

Cooperation necessitates openness and communication from all involved parties and the ability to shift attention beyond the military and traditional geopolitical priorities integral to national security strategies. In this regard, the disparities in political systems among different countries and specific elements of US military development pose challenges. Due to its political structure, China is inclined toward a significant degree of transparency, although not necessarily predictability. The US political framework sometimes enables a lower level of transparency, deliberately veiling its strategies, force plans, and military modernization initiatives.

Moreover, adjustments in the military sphere can significantly influence the transformation of alliances within the Asia Pacific region. The US maintains an extensive network of security alliances and any shift in its military posture can influence the commitments and partnerships with these allies, resulting in shifts to alliance cooperation structures⁵⁷. In addition, changes in the US military posture have the potential to affect the overall security and stability. The placement of military assets and enhancement of military capabilities can either enhance or undermine regional stability, depending on the intentions and actions of the entities involved. The alterations in military stance can also considerably impact the states' capacity to project their regional influence. For instance, deploying aircraft carriers and missile systems, along with setting up armed facilities, can enhance a state's ability to assert its influence and respond adeptly to regional developments.

The dynamics of tensions and conflict within the region are also influenced by changes in the US military posture, particularly within the disputed regions like the South China Sea. This strategically pivotal maritime corridor is responsible for accommodating the transit of nearly one-third of the world's maritime trade and has become a key point of contention. The prevalence of regional instability can disrupt critical supply chains and trade routes upon which the global economy relies heavily.

Lastly, these military posture shifts significantly influence multilateral engagement and diplomatic efforts within the region. This pertains to potential impacts on regional organizations and dialogues as states navigate the complexities of evolving security paradigms. Established institutions like the ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), recognized for their historical emphasis on promoting dialogue and cooperation among the member states, could face shifts in regional preferences. Consequently, regional states might be inclined to invest in

⁵⁷ Maryyum Masood and Amna Saqi, "The US is Shaping the Asia Pacific for Better or Worse," *Inkstick Media*, October 13, 2023, <https://inkstickmedia.com/the-us-is-shaping-the-asia-pacific-for-better-or-worse/>.

initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS to promote their security-driven interests rather than investing in existing regional institutions. Likewise, regional stakeholders, including the ASEAN member states, have tried to mediate tensions between the US and China; these efforts confront inherent limitations arising from the competitive dynamics between major powers. Also, regional actors can collectively address non-traditional security challenges, including terrorism, piracy, and natural disasters, through cooperation and sharing of critical information. These collaborative efforts can contribute to advancing a more stable regional environment.

The sub-regions of the Asia Pacific would likely face spillover effects. South Asia, which is emerging as a critical focal point, faces significant repercussions due to prevailing tensions among regional adversaries. This rivalry can be intensified for several compelling reasons, for instance, India's Quad membership the US decision of sharing advanced technologies with one state will heighten the security dilemma faced by another. In this context, it would compel Pakistan to seek out and acquire similar technology to uphold balance in the region.

Similarly, even though India is not a formal member of AUKUS, it will strive to benefit from this alliance. AUKUS has set a precedent in the realm of nuclear proliferation. India could use it to facilitate the acquisition of French nuclear propulsion to materialize an assured sea-based second-strike capability (ASSC). Such a development would have far-reaching implications for Pakistan. A relevant historical precedent is the exception of the US to the established norms by granting India a nuclear waiver in 2008. The prevailing military asymmetry between nuclear India and Pakistan underscores the fragility of strategic stability in South Asia, more because of their old, unresolved disputes. So, any effort by an extra-regional state to assist India in acquiring more arms would have an impact on the regional stability. Given these complexities, the US and allies must carefully reconsider the approach of creating security-related multilaterals in Asia-Pacific, that they do not support and promote bloc politics.

Conclusion

The evolving military posture of the US has significantly impacted geopolitics in Asia-Pacific. Any miscalculation may destabilize regional stability. The increasing US-China competition is reflected in a complex web of strategic calculations, security dilemmas, and an escalating arms race for military dominance. The consequences of such posturing and rivalry have far-reaching implications for this region and its beyond. The US is strengthening its alliances and partnerships in the region to counterbalance China's rise while China aims to affirm its position as a major regional actor using economic and military means. These trends, if unchecked, could lead to greater volatility, compelling other states to navigate their defense choices carefully amidst the increasing pressures. Today, security has evolved to encompass a broader spectrum, impacting more than a single region or a specific timeframe. Factors influencing security have grown increasingly intricate and interconnected. No country can secure itself while leaving others vulnerable, thus, the security of one state must not be ensured at the expense of others. The pursuit of national interests and the struggle for power lead to geopolitical tensions and conflicts.

Despite these challenges, disputes can be resolved through negotiations and confidence building measures. In a world where both traditional and non-traditional security paradigms are important for a state, the pursuits for development and security must go hand in hand. Therefore, it is time to prioritize partnerships over alliances and collaborate without fixating on real politik. All regional actors must prioritize dialogue, cooperation, and peaceful resolutions to mitigate tensions and bring stability to the region. This cooperative approach is important since peace and security will ultimately benefit all transcending the immediate interests of any single power.