



**INTEGRATING NON-MILITARY
INSTRUMENTS OF NATIONAL POWER
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE
PACIFIC**

BY DR. SABA SATTAR

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In recent months, two major sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific have become the renewed epicenters for strategic power competition between Washington and Beijing. Officially designated as the “[priority theater](#),” the Indo-Pacific is home to four distinct sub-regions: Northeast Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. While the United States has made considerable [diplomatic headway](#) with India and in [mediating](#) ties between its allies in Northeast Asia, the latter two subregions have become increasingly susceptible to visible Sino-American tensions within the gray zone realm.

The gray zone—a muzzy space between peacetime and full-fledged warfare—is the [preferred domain](#) for most state competitors to intensify strategic competition without directly eliciting conventional conflict. Gray-zone tactics typically feature gunboat diplomacy, cyber warfare, political propaganda, and other means below the threshold of declared hostilities. As Beijing actively pursues these critical sub-regions, Washington continues to respond through a

predominantly defensive lens following decades of waning geopolitical influence.

Recent Trends Set a Predictable Reactionary Pattern

In April 2022, China [signed](#) a historic [security pact](#) with the Solomon Islands. The pact enables Beijing to maintain an increased security presence if Chinese leaders perceive a threat against the safety of their citizens and major infrastructure projects, or if Honiara directly requests assistance to “maintain social order.” Washington subsequently [signed](#) a joint partnership declaration with most Pacific states, including Honiara, and [reopened](#) the embassy in Honiara it closed nearly [three decades](#) earlier.

As Southeast Asian and Pacific nations strictly observe political neutrality amid a rapidly unraveling Sino-American rivalry, regional domestic challenges are correspondingly increasing at the grassroots level. Washington’s more recent reactionary engagement in Papua New Guinea and the Philippines have been met with some resistance; experts from both states perceive an unfavorable increased regional US military presence. These trends underscore the urgent need for US policymakers to prioritize bilateral cooperation in other sectors, such as cultural exchanges, as a foundational trust to facilitate more sustainable defense partnerships.

Papua New Guinea: Seeking a New Rite of Passage

Since the past few years, Beijing has [attempted to sign](#) a security deal and [secure](#) infrastructure projects with Papua New Guinea—a largely dynamic tribal-based state in the southwestern Pacific. China has also contemplated building a port facility on Manus Island to enable greater access to the Bismarck Sea. A similar trend emerged shortly thereafter: Washington accelerated its bilateral initiatives with Port Moresby. The high-profile diplomatic visits resulted in the successful [implementation](#) of the Defense Cooperation and Ship Rider agreements in May 2023—building on the [1989 Status of Forces Agreement](#) nearly 35 years later.

The new deal [permits](#) the United States to [maintain](#) enhanced access to various dual-use facilities, such as

air and sea ports, in several areas and potentially build a naval base on Manus. The agreement [drew](#) widespread criticism and demonstrations by academics and student activists from the largest institutions in Papua New Guinea. As Prime Minister Marape and US Secretary of State Blinken signed the agreement at a university, students attempted to blockade the main campus entrance, demanding greater transparency. Various academics and journalists have also [circulated](#) a petition to reverse Washington's "imperial expansion into Papua New Guinea."

The Philippines: Doubling Down with Investments

In May 2022, the Philippines elected President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.—son of the former leader Marcos who once declared martial law for nearly a decade. This afforded Washington greater opportunities to reinvent the bilateral partnership previously stalled under the former Duterte administration. For one, the United States has [expanded](#) the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement to enhance access to four Philippine military facilities.

While the Filipino public largely supports a strong pushback against China's expanding footprint in the South China Sea, some civil opposition has [surfaced](#) concerning a visible US military presence. Some public setbacks have previously triggered anti-US demonstrations. Pro-Chinese political figures, local governors, nationalist groups, and members of the Filipino-Chinese business community have also alleged that bilateral US-Philippine security deals may lead to unwanted confrontation with and potential investment losses from China. The United States' primary emphasis on defense cooperation over strengthening other sectors of the bilateral partnership with equal perceived importance has contributed to some anti-US sentiment in Manila.

Moving Beyond Kinetic Force

Following two decades of defensive engagement in the Middle East, Washington's multilateral initiatives in other parts of the world have correspondingly dwindled. US policymakers have undertaken fewer

and fewer grassroots-level endeavors in Africa, which afforded greater Chinese economic opportunities. Since the [early 2000s](#), China's investments are now worth over \$2 trillion across the continent, with 10,000 state-owned enterprises. In the South China Sea, artificial military islands have been [built](#) in disputed critical waterways. In the Himalayas, the Sino-Indian border [remains](#) one of the world's most militarized regions. In the Pacific, a growing Chinese diplomatic and economic presence has prompted renewed American engagement.

As each subregion of the Indo-Pacific maintains a distinct set of political imperatives and strategic cultural orientation, Washington's theater-level strategy should reflect those operational realities for each unique geographical area. During the Reagan era, the United States [tailored](#) its policy to each country using an integrated strategy. In South Asia, the "decoupling" of India and Pakistan resulted in more fruitful cooperation after decades of Delhi's close cooperation with the USSR.

Southeast Asian and Pacific nations [seek](#) greater ties with the United States and the global community to [mitigate](#) climate change, tackle piracy, secure unimpeded access in international waters, and enhance digital security. Washington has stipulated each of these points in various partnership declarations in recent months. However, the timing of the re-engagement and predominant focus on securing access to bases and other dual-use infrastructure has prompted regional states to find themselves in the crossfires between the United States and China. One positive aspect is that the US military enjoys significant support from regional partners and allies—thanks to its participation in multilateral exercises, foreign military sales, defense educational training, and numerous other exchanges.

Complementing this positive development is the number of similar vital interests these regional partners share with the United States. The mutual concerns should serve as the underlying basis for American geostrategy with proactive bilateral exchanges in various sectors sustained through generations, besides the typical four-to-eight-year election span. Rather than enacting short-term policy

and reversing diplomatic course, the United States should emphasize its efforts on building multifaceted partnerships through cross-economic, educational, and cultural initiatives as a prerequisite or in equal importance to defense cooperation.

While recent regional developments have prompted Washington to secure swift bilateral security deals, other areas of strategic importance require consistent engagement to win favorable regional public opinion. In Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, recent security deals have been successfully ratified; however, the implementation process could be conducted in a more sustainable fashion.

Conclusion

For decades, the United States has served as the principal world leader in ensuring peace and stability. Since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, Washington has maintained and enhanced partnerships with like-minded states as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. More recently, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have forced the reallocation of resources and manpower away from the priority theater. As Washington reorients itself to mitigate rising tensions with Beijing nearly two oceans away, regional partnerships and alliances will be key to contain and eventually roll back expanding Chinese influence.