



Pacific Forum Update

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Issues & Insights is Pacific Forum's publication series that includes special reports (SR), conference reports (CR), and working papers (WP). These in-depth analyses cover a range of topics and are published on an occasional basis. The following have been published in 2025 and are available online [here](#).

Issues & Insights Vol. 25, SR1 — Advancing a Rules-based Maritime Order in the South China Sea

Edited by Jeffrey Ordaniel and Jay Tristan Tarriela

At the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. emphasized resolving South China Sea disputes under international law and resisting attempts to undermine the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Against this backdrop, the Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea convened over 100 experts, officials, and thought leaders from more than 20 countries on November 6-8, 2024, aiming to promote a free, open, secure, and rules-based maritime order. This inaugural Track 1.5 forum, co-organized by government and academic partners, tackled topics including the role of coast guards in upholding maritime law, regional perspectives on legal frameworks, malign influence operations, and the responsibilities of external partners. Participants highlighted escalating threats to the rule of law in recent years and proposed actionable policy recommendations for littoral states and international stakeholders. This volume compiles key findings, policy prescriptions, and pathways to reinforce the legal order in one of the world's most strategically contested seas.

Issues & Insights Vol. 25, WP1 — Keeping One at Arm's Length: The Missile & Nuclear Dimension of China's Counter-Intervention Strategy in the Western Pacific

by Collin Koh

Amid rising tensions in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, this paper examines how China's missile and nuclear capabilities underpin its counter-intervention strategy to deter or delay US military action in the Western Pacific. Drawing on Chinese military writings, Collin Koh analyzes the People's Liberation Army's intent to incapacitate American C4ISR networks through kinetic and non-kinetic attacks while targeting critical U.S. military assets, particularly in Guam, to hinder reinforcements and isolate the battlefield west of the First Island Chain. The study explores China's expanding missile arsenal, including hypersonic weapons, and the nuclear dimension, notably its growing sea-based deterrent. However, Koh highlights that despite these advances, significant strategic and operational challenges persist for the PLA in sustaining campaigns beyond the First Island Chain,

suggesting potential limitations to China's ability to fully execute its counter-intervention aims.

Issues & Insights Vol. 25, WP2 — Attaining All-domain Control: China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) Capabilities in the South China Sea

by Olli Pekka Suorsa

This paper provides a comprehensive assessment of China's rapidly advancing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the South China Sea, where the People's Liberation Army (PLA) seeks to deter and repel US intervention and challenge regional claimants. Dr. Olli Pekka Suorsa analyzes the PLA Southern Theatre Command's integration of advanced sensors and long-range precision weapons—its “sensors and shooters”—to achieve all-domain control over the contested waters. The report explores the unlikely yet destabilizing possibility of weapons of mass destruction being employed in a regional conflict and examines the growing military imbalance between China, Southeast Asian claimant states, and US forces. Concluding with four pragmatic policy recommendations, Suorsa advocates for improved US force survivability, enhanced defenses, renewed focus on CBRN readiness, and collaborative capacity-building among allies and partners to preserve regional access and stability amid China's expanding military reach.

Issues & Insights Vol. 25, WP3 — Game Theory: Negotiation Reputation, Payoffs and Impact on the SEANWFZ

by Karla Mae G. Pabeliña

This paper applies game theory to analyze the divergent approaches of China and the United States toward the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty and its protocol negotiations. Karla Mae G. Pabeliña argues that China strategically signals willingness to sign the protocol, enhancing its diplomatic reputation and aligning with ASEAN's desire to shield the region from nuclear risks. Conversely, the United States maintains a rigid stance on negative security assurances, risking perceptions of inflexibility and diminishing credibility in regional arms control and nonproliferation. The study models these dynamics as sequential games between ASEAN and each major power, highlighting how Southeast Asian nations, wary of great-power rivalry, might lean toward engaging China if it appears more responsive to regional security goals. As US-China strategic competition deepens and normative opposition to nuclear weapons grows in Southeast Asia, Pabeliña warns that space for constructive dialogue is shrinking, urging

ASEAN to assert its interests to maintain regional stability and neutrality.

Issues & Insights Vol. 25, WP4 — China's Underwhelming Effort to Undermine NATO's Nuclear Deterrent by William Alberque

This paper critiques China's recent campaign to challenge the legality of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), arguing that Beijing relies on outdated and inaccurate claims previously debunked by historical records and legal analyses. William Alberque examines China's 2024 reports alleging that NATO's arrangements violate the NPT, placing this narrative within China's broader strategy to weaken US extended deterrence and security guarantees, particularly amid the NPT review process. The study underscores that NATO's nuclear sharing was openly debated during NPT negotiations and is explicitly permitted under the treaty, a position documented in extensive archival evidence. Alberque contrasts China's current stance with Russia's earlier but now-abandoned efforts to discredit NATO on similar grounds, highlighting that China's arguments also raise unfounded fears of US intentions to replicate NATO's nuclear sharing model in the Indo-Pacific. The paper concludes by reaffirming the strategic value of U.S. nuclear guarantees in preventing proliferation and maintaining global security.

Issues & Insights Vol. 25, WP5 — The US and Its Indo-Pacific Allies Edited by Rob York

This volume highlights the research of Pacific Forum's James A. Kelly Korea Fellows and other emerging scholars, examining diverse challenges shaping US alliances across the Indo-Pacific amid intensifying US-China competition. Alexander Hynd and Max Broad analyze the Washington Declaration of 2023, finding that while it reaffirmed the US nuclear umbrella over South Korea, it has done little to curb Seoul's latent nuclear ambitions. Tom Ramage explores South Korea's expanding pursuit of critical minerals in Africa to secure supply chains and counter China's dominance in the sector. Florence Principe Gamboa assesses how the Philippines must navigate a potential second Trump administration, balancing unpredictability with the need for consistent security cooperation. James JB Park discusses the prospects for revitalizing the UN Command as South Korea grapples with demographic decline and regional security risks. Rei Koga investigates differences in foreign direct investment (FDI) regulation between Japan and Australia, driven by strategic culture and intelligence institutions amid China's rise. Daeun Choi delves into Kim Jong Un's evolving nuclear strategy, revealing a shift toward tactical weapons targeting South Korea and complicating denuclearization efforts. Finally, Kendrick Farm examines South Korea's dilemma in maintaining its dual identity as a US ally and global semiconductor powerhouse, emphasizing the need for securing rare earth supplies and diversifying supply chains to sustain economic resilience and strategic autonomy.

Issues & Insights Vol. 25, SR2 — Southeast Asian Views on Rising US-China Strategic Competition and Implications for Strategic Stability, Deterrence, and Nonproliferation Edited by David Santoro

This special report presents diverse Southeast Asian perspectives on the region's central role in the escalating US-China strategic competition, drawn from a Pacific Forum workshop held in Bangkok. David Santoro highlights Southeast Asia's underexplored role on the front lines of strategic rivalry, where regional actors see rising risks of crisis and conflict, including nuclear dimensions. Renato Cruz De Castro reviews ASEAN's Cold War strategy of "equibalancing" and argues for revitalizing ASEAN's goals, institutions, and security cooperation to maintain regional cohesion amid deepening geopolitical divides. Ngo Di Lan compares eight Southeast Asian countries, revealing divergent strategies—from Vietnam's and the Philippines' strong security ties with the US, to Indonesia's and Malaysia's balancing acts, to Cambodia's and Laos' closer alignment with China. Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto explores four futures for the region—from precarious peace, to possible US-China reconciliation, to covert warfare, to outright confrontation—emphasizing the need for ASEAN to combine multilateral diplomacy with minilateral security cooperation. Karla Mae G. Pabeliña examines China's nuclear modernization and its muted reception in Southeast Asia, arguing that regional states largely reject nuclear deterrence logic and remain focused on disarmament, while cautioning against forcing the region into nuclear debates. Finally, Alvin Chew analyzes Southeast Asia's growing interest in nuclear energy for clean power, arguing the US has a unique opportunity to partner with regional countries, leveraging its regulatory reputation and commercial nuclear technology, while navigating challenges in safeguards, waste management, and competition with Chinese and Russian state-backed nuclear industries.