

PACIFIC FORUM
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Indo-Pacific Connections

EDITED BY
ROB YORK





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Introduction

As we enter 2026, the stakes, and the complications, associated with a secure Indo-Pacific continue to increase. The People's Republic of China continues to signal its ambitions for the region, especially for Taiwan, and the United States' capacity to deter a forced unification scenario is questioned. In keeping with this theme, several of the papers in this volume address relevant topics.

Just in time for Pacific Forum's flagship Honolulu Defense Forum (Jan. 11-13), Pacific Forum Senior Director Kimberly Lehn discusses the stakes associated with US preparation for conflict, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Prof. Mason Richey covers what might happen in the event of a simultaneous crisis in the region (namely in Taiwan and South Korea) and how to prepare for it, while Army Reserve Logistics Officer Sandra Roshonda Thomas discusses how defense production can be modernized to meet upcoming challenges. Pacific Forum has a long-standing mission of identifying the crises to come, and the related challenges of deterring aggression, preventing forced cross-strait unification, and the modernizing defense production are among the greatest challenges on the horizon.

But Pacific Forum's mandate extends further than that, to covering the entire Indo-Pacific and training the next generation of analysts who will do the work in the coming decades. To that end, Resident James A. Kelly Korea Fellow Marialaura De Angelis discusses how narrative conflict must be resolved to create conditions for fruitful US-North Korea talks, while Resident Lloyd & Lilian Vasey Fellow Aung Thura Ko Ko describes how the ongoing conflict in Myanmar has revealed the institutional weaknesses of ASEAN, and how they might be reformed. Lastly, with the PRC's economic and diplomatic influence casting a long shadow over all corners of the Indo-Pacific, Pacific Forum Young Leader Moses Sakai and Nonresident Vasey Fellow Sheewon Min discuss what the influence means for Pacific Islands Countries and ASEAN (specifically Brunei), respectively.

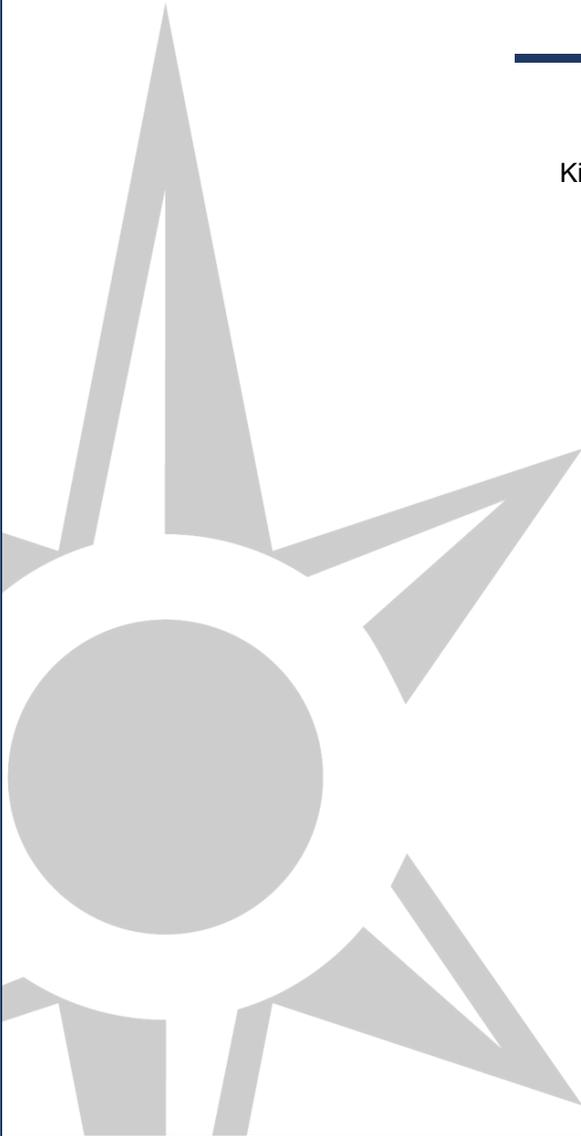
The collected papers in this volume represent Pacific Forum's commitment to a safe and secure Indo-Pacific, and hope each of them contribute to a more informed readership.

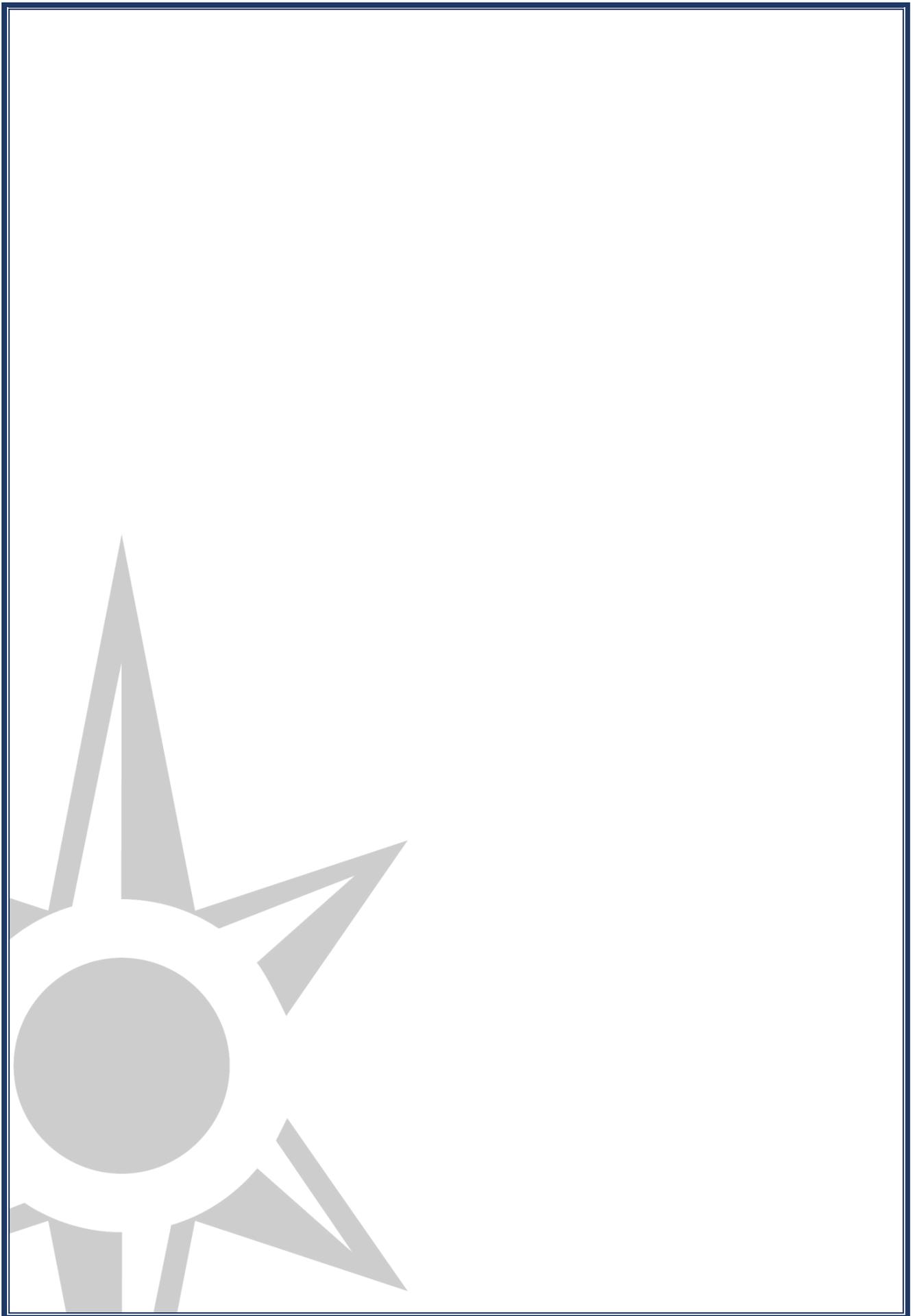
Rob York
Director for Regional Affairs
Pacific Forum International



The Crisis Now: What's at Stake in Confronting Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond

By
Kimberly Lehn





Executive Summary

Kimberly Lehn

Today's military and economic competition with China is the future of both American and global security, prosperity, and influence. This isn't just about faraway conflicts or abstract statistics—it touches our daily lives, our jobs, our freedoms, and the rules of the world future generations will inherit. China's increasing military and technological modernization, the emerging "axis of autocracy," the use of economic warfare, and the erosion of conventional deterrence in the Indo-Pacific require immediate and comprehensive changes to security and economic approaches to meet today's threats. Moreover, the acceleration of China's domestic manufacturing and technological capabilities across all economic and societal domains has had a creeping impact on the United States and the rest of the world.

The converging threats in the Indo-Pacific demand a fundamental reassessment of America's strategic approach. As the "Davidson window" narrows toward 2027, our response must transcend traditional bureaucratic incrementalism and embrace a whole-of-nation effort that leverages all elements of American power. The gravity of this moment cannot be overstated—we stand at a historical inflection point that will determine whether the coming decades unfold under the auspices of democratic values or authoritarian control.

Introduction

If someone asked whether a glass is half full or half empty, I'd typically would say "it's half full." I'm still optimistic, but events over the last year have altered global stability significantly that require an assessment of what's happened to the security environment and more fundamentally, what's at stake for all of us in the free world. China's increasing military and technological modernization, the emerging "axis of autocracy," the use of economic warfare, and the erosion of conventional deterrence in the Indo-Pacific require immediate and comprehensive changes to security and economic approaches to meet today's threats. In the newly released Pentagon 2025 report to Congress on the military and security developments involving China, it states "China expects to be able to fight and win a war on Taiwan by the end of 2027" and "China's top military strategy focuses squarely on overcoming the United States through a whole-of-nation mobilization effort that Beijing terms 'national total war.'"¹ Certainly, in just the past few years, we've seen rapid advancements in China's military modernization and the narrowing of the so-called "Davidson window"—the six-year period identified by then Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Davidson in 2021, during which he warned the threat of a Chinese move on Taiwan could materialize in 2027.² As we enter 2026, that window closes.

There is also the acceleration of China's domestic manufacturing and technological capabilities across all economic and societal domains, which has had a creeping impact on the United States and the rest of the world.³ If anything, it has served as a wakeup call on the impact that supply chain vulnerabilities, like critical minerals or semiconductors, have on the US and other countries. The fact is, the challenges are so complex, and they require both a full net assessment

of what's taking place and, more importantly, a full recalibration of what America and its allies should do today.

China Rapidly Transforming its Military

China's military modernization likely represents the most comprehensive challenge to American power since the Soviet Union. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has undergone a fundamental transformation from a personnel-heavy continental force to a technologically sophisticated military capable of projecting power across multiple domains.

The Pentagon's Annual Report to Congress has consistently stated that the PLA is progressing toward its 2027 benchmark of military modernization, which aligns with the 100th anniversary of the PLA's founding on Aug. 1, 1927.⁴ Despite a series of military purges by Xi Jinping, suggesting either military capability issues or Xi's effort to install trusted leadership, China now possesses the world's largest navy by number of ships, with expansion in blue-water capabilities, including aircraft carriers, cruisers, and nuclear submarines.⁵

Additionally, China is making progress on its own nuclear triad. The Department of War estimates that China has "surpassed 600 operational nuclear warheads in its stockpile as of mid-2024 and is expected to have over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030, much of which will be deployed at higher readiness levels. The PRC will continue growing its force through at least 2035," fundamentally altering strategic stability.⁶

Military exercises around Taiwan have grown increasingly elaborate and realistic, with the US Indo-Pacific Command Commander, Adm. Samuel Paparo, calling them "not just exercises" but "rehearsals for forced unification."⁷ According to his

¹ US Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress, 2025" <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Dec/23/2003849070/-1/-1/1/ANNUAL-REPORT-TO-CONGRESS-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2025.PDF>

² Michael Mazza. "A Threat Made Manifest: Trump, Taiwan, and the Davidson Window." Global Taiwan Institute. 9 (22). Nov. 27, 2024. <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/11/a-threat-made-manifest/>

³ "Xi Jinping Stresses Accelerating the Establishment of a New Development Pattern When Presiding Over a Political Bureau Group Study Session." *China Insight*. 2023. http://www.bireview.com/CHINA_INSIGHT_2023/China_Insight_Special_Issue_on_Chinas_Economy_in_2023/202303/t20230303_800323867.html

⁴ US Department of Defense. "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024."

US Department of Defense.

<https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>

⁵ US Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress."

⁶ US Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress,"; Defense News Army, "Focus | Strategic Command warns that the US may lose strategic superiority against China without urgent nuclear triad modernization." Defense News Army. April 3, 2025.

<https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/2025/focus-strategic-command-warns-that-the-us-may-lose-strategic-superiority-against-china-without-urgent-nuclear-triad-modernization>

⁷ Jennifer Hlad, "China is rehearsing for war, Indo-Pacific commander says." Defense One, Feb. 13, 2025.

2025 congressional testimony, the “PLA escalated military pressure against Taiwan by 300% in 2024” through centerline crossings and entries into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone.

China’s significant progress in hypersonic weapons, space-based and anti-satellite capabilities, artificial intelligence applications, and autonomous systems is “outpacing” traditional US advantages in key domains.⁸ A 2023 RAND Study assessed that Chinese military doctrine has also evolved toward “systems confrontation” or “systems destruction warfare,” which aims to paralyze or destroy the operational capability of the enemy’s operational systems rather than merely defeating forces in direct combat.⁹ This approach targets command networks, logistics chains, and information systems that underpin Western military effectiveness.

The threat extends beyond conventional military domains into cyberspace, as evidenced by China’s state-sponsored hacking campaigns. Salt Typhoon and Volt Typhoon cyber intrusions highlight sophisticated Chinese state-sponsored hacking operations that target critical US infrastructure.¹⁰ ¹¹ This extensive cyber espionage campaign penetrated telecommunications networks, energy grids, water systems, and transportation infrastructure across the United States, placing digital backdoors that could be activated in a future conflict. These incursions reveal China’s strategy of preparing the battlefield by compromising systems that would be crucial during a military confrontation, creating vulnerabilities that could severely hamper American military and civilian response capabilities in a crisis.

The Axis is Getting its Act Together

Unlike anything except during the Cold War, adversaries in multiple theaters have sought to seize

the moment by fueling each other’s economies, sharing technologies and weapon systems, training militarily together, and coordinating on strategies for a new global system that would be controlled by their leadership. The deepening cooperation among authoritarian states, particularly China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, which the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission have termed an “axis of autocracy,” has expanded beyond traditional diplomatic and economic ties into military training, frontline cooperation, and mutual support for core national security objectives. This has been evident through the war in Ukraine in Europe, assistance in weapon systems for the Houthis in the Middle East, and territorial aggression and continued gray zone tactics in the Indo-Pacific.

Evidence of this growing coordination is substantial and concerning. Over the last few years, we’ve witnessed joint naval exercises in the North Pacific involving China and Russia and Russia, China, and Iran naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman, alongside separate bilateral exercises suggesting coordination in potential conflict scenarios.¹² North Korean troop deployments to support Russian operations in Ukraine demonstrate a willingness to provide direct military assistance to partners.¹³ The sharing of military technologies, particularly between Russia and China, with evidence of Chinese assistance to Russian defense production amid sanctions, further confirms this troubling pattern.¹⁴

Compounding these military challenges is a troubling development on the geopolitical stage—last year, Xi in his visit to Moscow with Russian leader Vladimir Putin said, “China will work with Russia to shoulder the special responsibilities of major world powers,” and the two should be “friends of steel.”¹⁵ In their joint statement, they committed to deepening ties and “strengthen coordination and

<https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2025/02/china-rehearsing-war-indo-pacific-commander-says/403011/>

⁸ Adm. Samuel J. Paparo. “STATEMENT OF ADMIRAL SAMUEL J. PAPARO COMMANDER, US INDO-PACIFIC COMMAND US INDO-PACIFIC COMMAND POSTURE.” Armed Services Senate. April 2025. https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/testimony_of_adm_paparo.pdf

⁹ Mark Cozad et al. “Gaining Victory in Systems Warfare: China’s Perspective on the US-China Military Balance,” RAND, March 1, 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1535-1.html

¹⁰ Craig Singleton, “China’s Tech Triple Play Threatens US National Security,” Real Clear Defense. March 25, 2025.

https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/03/25/chinas_tech_triple_play_threatens_us_national_security_1099692.html

¹¹ US Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress, 2025.)

¹² Reuters, “Russian, Chinese ships conduct joint drills in Pacific, Russia’s agencies report.” Reuters. Oct. 7, 2024.

[https://www.reuters.com/world/china/russian-chinese-ships-conduct-joint-](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/russian-chinese-ships-conduct-joint-drills-pacific-russias-agencies-report-2024-10-08/)

[drills-pacific-russias-agencies-report-2024-10-08/](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/12/iran-russia-china-conduct-joint-naval-drills-in-gulf-of-oman); Al Jazeera. “Iran, Russia, China conduct joint naval drills in Gulf of Oman.” Al Jazeera. March 12, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/12/iran-russia-china-conduct-joint-naval-drills-in-gulf-of-oman>

¹³ Joel Guinto and Jean Mackenzie. “N Korea confirms it sent troops to fight for Russia in Ukraine war.” BBC. April 27, 2025.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckg25wxvpy2o>

¹⁴ Abby Shepherd. “Sharing of submarine technology between Russia and China poses threat to US dominance, INDOPACOM commander says.” *Inside Defense*. Nov. 25, 2024. <https://insidedefense.com/insider/sharing-submarine-technology-between-russia-and-china-poses-threat-us-dominance-indopacom/>; Kylie Atwood. “China is giving Russia significant support to expand weapons manufacturing as Ukraine war continues, US officials say.” CNN. April 12, 2024.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/12/politics/china-russia-support-weapons-manufacturing/index.html>

¹⁵ Keir Simmons, Natasha Lebedeva, and Jennifer Jett. “Xi and Putin vow stronger ties at Russia’s World War II Victory Day parade ahead of US-

jointly respond firmly to the United States' policy of 'dual containment' against both countries."¹⁶ This meeting preceded the BRICS summit in Rio Janeiro, Brazil, where China and Russia alongside other Global South nations seek to reshape the multilateral system and encourage trade and new forms of payment outside of the US dollar, especially as US tariffs take effect.¹⁷ These authoritarian powers are developing alternative financial architectures and supply chains designed to withstand Western sanctions and economic pressure.¹⁸ China and Russia have sought to gain momentum for these initiatives in the Global South and the Middle East through payment systems and multilateral fora like BRICS to create a parallel system that could undermine Western economic leverage in the future.¹⁹

While there has been hesitancy to call these relationships formal alliances, functional partnerships like that between China and Russia are increasingly alliance-like in practice, regardless of terminology. This growing alignment challenges the assumption that these states would act independently, potentially requiring the United States and allies to prepare for simultaneous or coordinated challenges across multiple theaters. While quiet now, the axis will continue to bide their time and surprise us when we least expect it.

Economic Statecraft and Influence Competition

Beyond traditional military competition, China has expanded its influence through sophisticated economic statecraft. While the Belt and Road Initiative has provided critical infrastructure financing to developing nations and is widely known for creating relationships of dependency that can be leveraged for strategic advantage and access for ports, railways, and critical infrastructure like telecommunications, China's aggressive commitment to long-term technology through the development of its Five-Year Plans may end up being

one of the consequential game changers for the US and our security architecture.

China's strategic approach has been further clarified in its recent National Security white paper titled "China's Holistic Approach to National Security in the New Era."²⁰ This document, the first of its kind since Xi Jinping's rise to power, outlines an expansive concept of national security that spans economic, technological, cultural, and informational domains—not just traditional military concerns and that China's vision of "comprehensive national security" and China's "holistic approach to national security" should be the guiding principle for national security. It also integrates economic security as a fundamental component of national power, justifying state intervention in markets, technology transfer requirements, and industrial policies as security imperatives rather than merely economic choices.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping has consistently pledged "self-reliance and self-strengthening" to develop AI in China and targets serious goals for "future industries" such as robotics, biotechnology, and advanced manufacturing development across technology sectors like semiconductors, energy, and production of critical minerals to provide leverage in technology competition and serve as coercive tools.²¹ The white paper reinforces these priorities, emphasizing "key core technologies" as strategic needs for overall security concerns. Additionally, China over the last year has utilized its own export controls and restrictions on technologies and critical minerals to countries to control the terms of negotiations and highlight its own leverage against the United States and its allies and partners.

What's at Stake

At its core, what's at stake in the military and economic competition with China is the future of both American and global security, prosperity, and

China trade talks." NBC News, May 9, 2025.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/world/europe/russia-parade-world-war-ii-putin-china-xi-trade-deal-tariffs-rcna205534>

¹⁶ Simmons, Lebedeva, Jett "Xi and Putin vow stronger ties."

¹⁷ *The Jakarta Post*, "BRICS summit planned for July in Rio: Brazil," *The Jakarta Post*, Feb. 16, 2025.

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2025/02/16/brics-summit-planned-for-july-in-rio-brazil.html>

¹⁸ Reuters, "Exclusive: 'China Track' bank netting system shields Russia-China trade from Western eyes." Reuters, April 22, 2025.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/china-track-bank-netting-system-shields-russia-china-trade-western-eyes-2025-04-22/>; Junhua Zhang. "China and Russia: Toward an alternate financial system."

Geopolitical Intelligence Services. Oct. 21, 2024.

<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/tr/china-russia-finance/>

¹⁹ Arab News Japan. "Saudi Arabia part of China trial of yuan digital currency payments." *Arab News Japan*, Oct. 11, 2024. <https://arab.news/z4fip>

²⁰ Andrew S. Erickson. "New White Paper: 'China's National Security in the New Era.'" Andrew S. Erickson: China analysis from original sources. May 12, 2025. <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2025/05/new-white-paper-chinas-national-security-in-the-new-era/>

²¹ James Pomfret and Summer Zhen. "China's Xi calls for self sufficiency in AI development amid US rivalry," Reuters, April 30, 2025.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-xi-calls-self-sufficiency-ai-development-amid-us-rivalry-2025-04-26/>; Ji Siqu. "China targets 'future industries' in 2024, humanoid robots and biomedicines to drive high-quality economic growth." *South China Morning Post*. Dec. 23, 2023.

<https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3246040/china-targets-industries-future-2024-humanoid-robots-and-biomedicines-drive-high-quality-economic>

influence. This isn't just about faraway conflicts or abstract statistics—it touches our daily lives, our jobs, our freedoms, and the rules of the world future generations will inherit.

War and Despair

Perhaps it seems like an oversimplification, but an erosion of conventional deterrence in the near-term could ensue conflict in the cross-strait over Taiwan, which would likely represent perhaps the most acute flashpoint for the globe, combining geopolitical significance with global economic importance.

A conflict over Taiwan would have catastrophic consequences. Adm. Paparo at the Honolulu Defense Forum in February 2025 stated that potential casualties could reach “up to 1 million deaths and widespread despair with or without American involvement.”²² Research by the Rhodium Group also indicates a Taiwan conflict would be difficult to reverse in terms of impact on trade and investment on a global scale, leaving few countries untouched.²³ Beyond the democratic governance and human rights implications, Taiwan produces approximately 92% of the world's advanced semiconductors, components essential to everything from consumer electronics to sophisticated military systems.²⁴

Most importantly, Taiwan's fall would likely not represent the end of Chinese expansion but rather a beginning, fundamentally altering regional power dynamics and undermining the credibility of US security guarantees throughout the region.

The emerging security environment demands that US planners consider an even more challenging scenario: simultaneous conflicts erupting across the Indo-Pacific theater. A recent Atlantic Council Guardian Tiger tabletop exercise on this possibility examined scenarios where crises in both the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula escalate concurrently, potentially involving multiple nuclear powers.²⁵ Their analysis suggests that such a two-front conflict could rapidly escalate to nuclear use, with

devastating regional and global consequences. The study emphasizes that current US force posture and operational planning are primarily designed for single-theater conflicts, creating dangerous vulnerabilities if adversaries coordinate their actions. The tabletop exercise study highlighted how the close relationships among China, Russia, and North Korea could enable coordinated opportunistic aggression, with one crisis deliberately timed to distract from or complicate the response to another. US military resources, particularly naval assets, air power, and logistical capabilities, would be severely strained in responding to simultaneous contingencies—potentially forcing impossible choices about where to prioritize limited assets. This scenario is particularly concerning given the strategic significance of both Taiwan and South Korea to global supply chains, US alliance credibility, and regional stability.

Our Organizing Principles

Beyond specific security concerns, the competition in the Indo-Pacific fundamentally involves economic security and the organizing principles of international society. According to the 2025 National Security Strategy states, “the Indo-Pacific is already the source of almost half the world's GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP), and one third based on nominal GDP. That share is certain to grow over the 21st century.” Losing access or a halt in commercial shipping would have significant consequences to the global economy.

Living under China's model of authoritarian governance would threaten to reshape international norms in ways that undermine democracy, free markets, and free speech. Additionally, a dominance in critical industries from technology to pharmaceuticals would put our supply chains and economic security at risk. Regardless of whether there is a kinetic or non-kinetic conflict, the competition for innovation leadership in areas like AI, biotech, and space will determine who sets the ethical and security standards for decades to come.

²² Pacific Forum, “ADM. PAPARO WARNS OF GROWING THREATS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC, CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION AT HONOLULU DEFENSE FORUM 2025,” Pacific Forum, Feb. 19, 2025.

<https://pacforum.org/publications/adm-paparo-warns-of-growing-threats-in-the-indo-pacific-calls-for-urgent-action-at-honolulu-defense-forum-2025/>

²³ Charlie Vest, Agatha Kratz and Reva Goujon, “The Global Economic Disruptions from a Taiwan Conflict,” Rhodium Group, Dec. 14, 2022.

<https://rhg.com/research/taiwan-economic-disruptions/>

²⁴ Lin Jones et al., “US EXPOSURE TO THE TAIWANESE SEMICONDUCTOR INDUSTRY,” Economics Working Paper, Rhodium

Group, November 2023.

https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/working_papers/us_exposure_to_the_taiwanese_semiconductor_industry_11-21-2023_508.pdf

²⁵ Markus Garlauskas, Lauren D. Gilbert, and Kyoko Imai, “A rising nuclear double-threat in East Asia: Insights from our Guardian Tiger I and II tabletop exercises.” Atlantic Council, May 12, 2025.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-rising-nuclear-double-threat-in-east-asia-insights-from-our-guardian-tiger-i-and-ii-tabletop-exercises/>

Additionally, China's approach to international relations emphasizes state sovereignty over human rights, hierarchical relations over equal treatment, and authoritarian governance as a legitimate alternative to democracy. This vision directly challenges the post-1945 rules-based order that, despite imperfections, has underpinned global stability and unprecedented prosperity.

Freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes, and protection of rights for smaller states would all be compromised if China successfully establishes regional hegemony. The implications extend far beyond geopolitics into the very nature of governance and individual liberty. China's model emphasizes authoritarian control, censorship, and surveillance—both at home and increasingly abroad through technology and economic leverage. If China reshapes international norms in its favor, American values like free markets, free speech, and democracy could face growing pressure even beyond China's borders.

Consider the concrete manifestations of this alternative vision: living under surveillance or rules dominated by the Chinese Communist Party, being targeted by Chinese media outlets for expressing criticism of Beijing's policies, or businesses self-censoring to maintain market access.²⁶ These are not hypothetical scenarios but emerging realities where Chinese influence has already grown dominant. The export of digital authoritarianism—through surveillance technologies, internet governance standards, and information control mechanisms—represents a particularly concerning aspect of China's challenge to democratic values.

As one strategic assessment by the Center of Strategic and Budgetary Assessments concluded, "the extent of US and Western primacy has diminished," and we are no longer in a post-Cold War world era but in a crisis of global order.²⁷ The fundamental character of international relations in the 21st century will be significantly shaped by developments in the Indo-Pacific over the coming decade, determining whether

democratic governance or authoritarian models will set the template for global development.

Charting a Path Forward

The converging threats in the Indo-Pacific demand a fundamental reassessment of America's strategic approach. As the "Davidson window" narrows toward 2027, our response must transcend traditional bureaucratic incrementalism and embrace a whole-of-nation effort that leverages all elements of American power. The gravity of this moment cannot be overstated—we stand at a historical inflection point that will determine whether the coming decades unfold under the auspices of democratic values or authoritarian control.

Military Posture Improvements

America must revitalize its *military posture* in the Indo-Pacific with a sense of urgency befitting the challenge. This requires not merely increased defense spending, but targeted investments in capabilities that directly counter China's anti-access/area denial strategy. The Pentagon must rapidly field survivable, long-range precision strike systems, distributed sensing networks, resilient command and control capabilities, and advanced undersea platforms. Special emphasis should be placed on developing and deploying hypersonic weapons, autonomous systems, and counter-space capabilities to maintain escalation dominance across all warfighting domains to maintain not just the readiness levels needed but the decisive capabilities needed to hopefully deter conflict.

Beyond hardware, the US military must fundamentally rethink operational concepts for high-intensity conflict with a near-peer adversary. Traditional force concentration models must give way to more distributed, resilient approaches that can withstand initial strikes and continue operating in contested environments. Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) investments must be accelerated to enable synchronized operations across

²⁶ Paul Mozur, Muye Xiao and John Liu. "'An Invisible Cage': How China Is Policing the Future." *New York Times*. June 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/25/technology/china-surveillance-police.html>; Global Times. 2024. "What is Glaser deliberately evading by pretending to be the victim?: Global Times editorial." *Global Times*. June 24. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202406/1314752.shtml>; Kieran Green et al., "Censorship Practices of the People's Republic of China." Center for Intelligence and Research Analysis. Feb. 20, 2024, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-02/Censorship_Practices_of_the_Peoples_Republic_of_China.pdf

²⁷ Hal Brands and Eric S. Edelman. "Why is the World So Unsettled? The End of the Post-Cold War Era and the Crisis of Global Order." Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. May 25, 2017. https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Why_Is_the_World_So_Unsettled_FORMAT_FINAL.pdf

services. Equally critical is the hardening of forward bases, pre-positioning of munitions and supplies, and development of alternative logistics networks to sustain operations under sustained attack. The Presidential and congressional budgets adds monies to fund these capabilities. This is welcomed and much needed, but to really “pivot” to the Pacific, we need sustained funding and attention.

We must also prepare for the possibility of simultaneous conflicts, as identified by the Atlantic Council’s Guardian Tiger Tabletop analysis.²⁸ This requires not only additional capacity but significantly improved interoperability with allies who would be central to any regional response. Simultaneously, acquisition processes must be streamlined to prioritize rapid fielding of existing technologies over pursuing perfect solutions that arrive too late to influence the strategic balance. Wartime procurement mentalities to meet the urgency of the moment must be adopted.

The cornerstone of America’s Indo-Pacific strategy must be its *alliance architecture*. These relationships represent the United States’ asymmetric advantage over China, which remains comparatively isolated despite its economic influence. Strengthening traditional alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines while deepening security partnerships with India, Vietnam, and Indonesia, and more will create an integrated deterrence web that complicates Chinese military planning. New trilateral or multilateral frameworks tailored specifically to Indo-Pacific security challenges should complement existing structures like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and separately the Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) agreements, creating overlapping layers of cooperation that enhance regional resilience against coercion.

Economic and Diplomatic Security Advancements

Economic security represents perhaps the most challenging dimension of this competition, requiring difficult trade-offs between short-term economic interests and long-term strategic imperatives. The United States must systematically reduce critical supply chain dependencies on China, particularly in defense and technology sectors. This effort should

include accelerated domestic production of semiconductors and other strategic technologies, alongside coordinated export controls with allies and partners to prevent technology transfers that enhance China’s military capabilities. Crucially, the United States must provide credible economic alternatives to Chinese investment through revitalized development financing and trade frameworks that offer partner nations paths to prosperity that also removes their alignment with Beijing. Economic security can no longer be seen as siloed from defense security, nor can dual-use technologies be used to draw clear lines between what is critical and what is not in this era of competition.

American diplomatic engagement must match the scale of China’s global influence campaign. This requires reinvigorating US leadership in regional institutions, expanding diplomatic presence across the Indo-Pacific, and articulating a positive vision for the region that transcends security competition. American diplomats must counter China’s narrative of inevitable dominance by highlighting the enduring appeal of sovereign governance and prosperity with the United States. We need more embassies and consulates abroad to do this, which includes economic consulars and defense attaches across theaters oriented toward strategic competition and driving a positive narrative of US influence and capacity. We also need industry advocates or consulars at Embassies that understand the stake and are driving US and allied national security needs that benefit economic interests. Strong allies and partners are fundamental for this but so are strong relationships with those allies and partners to enact the change we want to see going forward.

Technological Leadership

Finally, *technological leadership* will ultimately determine the long-term trajectory of this competition. The United States must dramatically increase funding for research and development in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, and other frontier domains while fostering public-private partnerships that accelerate innovation. US and allied industry are critical to ensuring the U.S maintains its leadership in these areas, and they must be involved in first understanding the problem and objectives so that they can innovate and find greater solutions that

²⁸ Garlauskas, Gilbert, and Imai. “A rising nuclear double-threat in East Asia.”

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government stakeholders may not have known as possible. Also important is the development of ethical frameworks and standards for emerging technologies that reflect democratic values. By establishing international technology alliances that align like-minded nations around shared principles or bridging new ties as seen in new deals of investment with the Middle East, America can ensure that the technologies shaping humanity's future embody the values of openness, transparency, and individual liberty rather than facilitating unprecedented levels of state control. These technological partnerships, however, must ensure that each side is playing by the same security protocols to not allow key technology, parts, or know how in the hands of strategic competitors.

The United States and the globe face this challenge at a moment of political polarization and fiscal constraint. Yet history demonstrates that any divisions when confronted with clear and present dangers to our core interests. The Indo-Pacific competition represents precisely such a challenge—one that will define the contours of international order for generations. Our response must match the magnitude of what is at stake.

The outcome of this will determine whether we remain free, prosperous, and secure—or whether we must adapt to a world where an authoritarian power increasingly sets the terms of engagement. The difficulty of untangling our dependence on China only underscores the urgency of beginning this process now, with strategic coordination and operational urgency. And yet, for all these challenges, I return to where I began: the glass remains half full.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

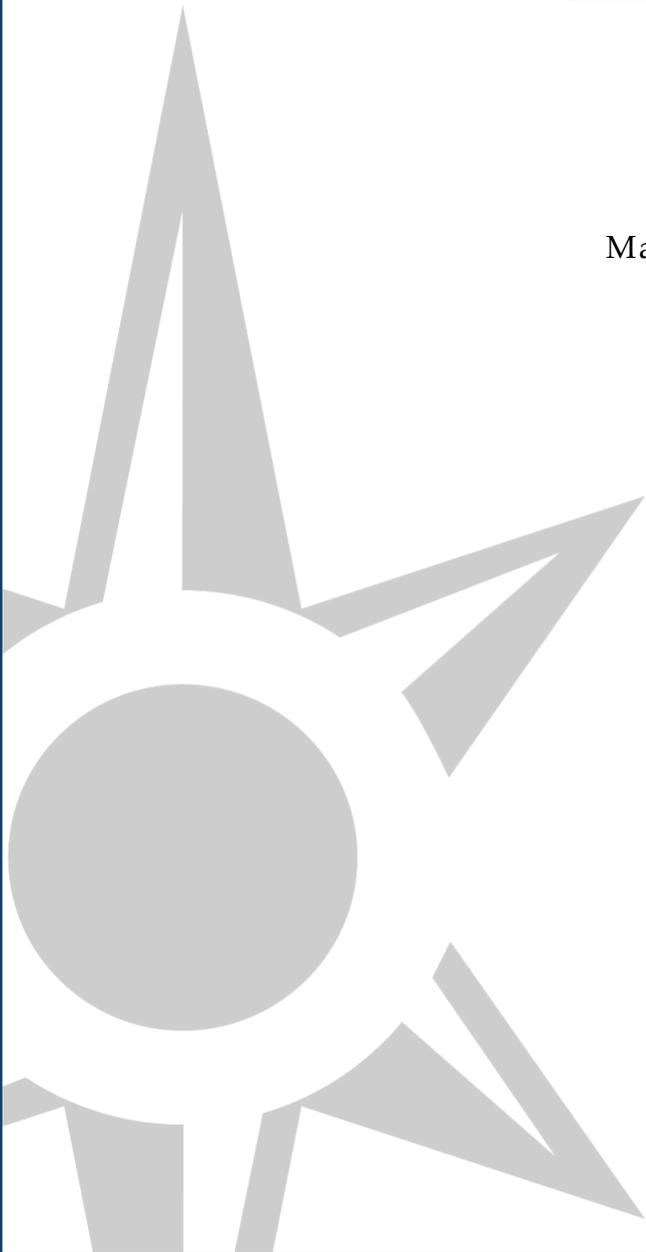
KIMBERLY LEHN is the Senior Director of the Honolulu Defense Forum (HDF) at the Pacific Forum. HDF seeks to facilitate dialogue and solutions between a wide range of actors from the private and public sectors to bolster deterrence in the face of an increasingly contested regional security environment.

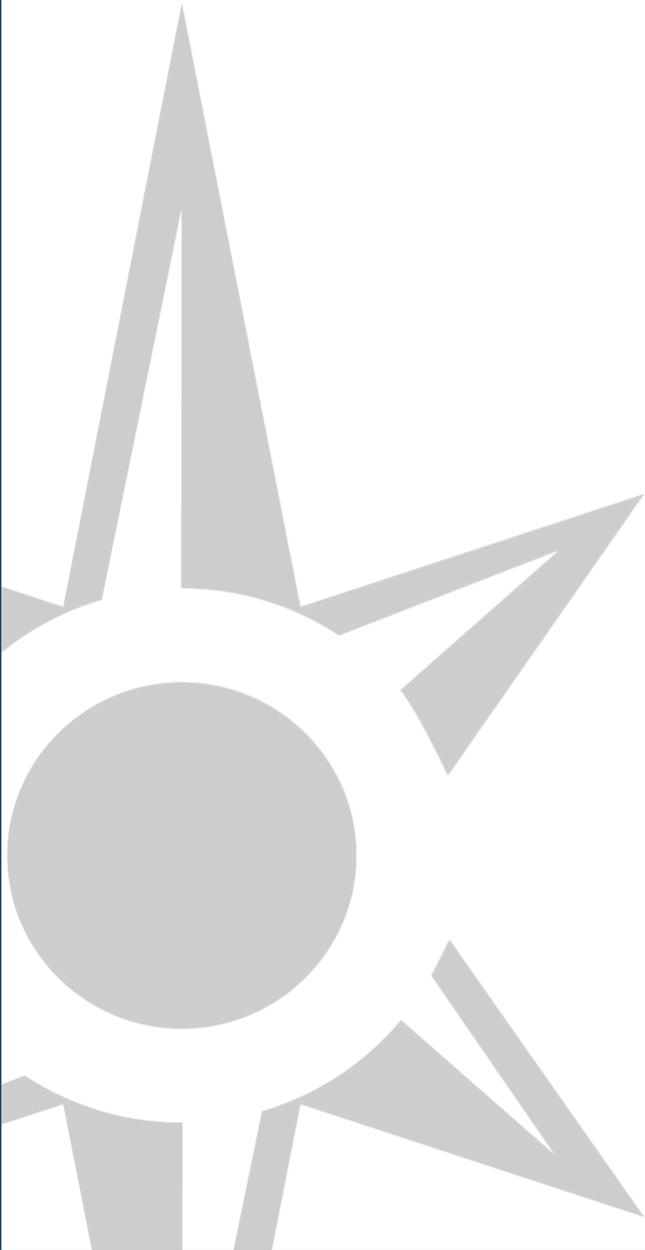
She is a national security professional with over 20 years of experience in the U.S. federal government and in the private sector. She advises leading companies on national security issues and previously served in management and analytic roles at the Central Intelligence Agency as well as on assignments to the National Security Council, the Department of State, and on the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee. As a professional staff member, she focused on the national security challenges facing the United States, particularly strategic competition with China and Russia, and the important role alliances and partnerships play to build collective security.

She publishes regularly on national security, Indo-Pacific, and defense and technology issues. She is also a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis in Washington, DC.

Critical Mission Preparedness: The US and Northeast Asian Allies in a Dual Taiwan-Korea Contingency

By
Mason Richey





Executive Summary

Mason Richey

This *Issues and Insights* policy report examines US preparedness for a dual contingency scenario involving a blockade of Taiwan in conjunction with a Korean Peninsula crisis.

As China emerges as a near-peer military competitor with mature anti-access/area-denial capabilities, and revisionist North Korea grows its conventional and nuclear capabilities, coordinated or opportunistic aggression poses challenges to the strategic interests of the US and its allies in East Asia. In this context, the report identifies a Chinese maritime blockade of Taiwan as a likely scenario, potentially paired with North Korean attacks along the Northern Limit Line. Such a dual crisis would severely test US-led deterrence, allied military capacity and cohesion, and operational readiness to assist Taiwan. In particular, China's expanding naval forces and extensive missile arsenal create major obstacles to US intervention, despite technological advantages.

Given the above scenario, challenges to readiness for critical Taiwan-assistance missions include China's anti-access/area-denial strategies across the first island chain, securing logistics supply lines at significant distances from US and allied territory, and coordinating with allies facing difficult tradeoffs between economic ties with China and security commitments to Washington. South Korea and Japan would confront acute dilemmas regarding base access, sanctions participation, and direct military involvement while managing vulnerabilities to retaliation by China and potentially coordinated threats from North Korea.

The report recommends priority actions across three phases. During pre-crisis response, the US must maintain credible deterrence, assist Taiwan in stockpiling critical supplies, and secure advance agreements with allies on cooperation parameters. Once a blockade crisis is imminent or underway non-kinetic responses should emphasize intelligence sharing and coordinated multi-domain (e.g., cyber) operations to counter China's "system of systems" conflict approach. For blockade-breaking operations, the US (and potentially allies) must prepare noncombatant evacuations, establish humanitarian airbridges, conduct blockade-testing with merchant vessels, and pre-position military assets—including carrier strike groups, submarines, aircraft, and missile defense systems—within the theater.

Success requires allies to accept differential responsibilities, with South Korea potentially focusing on peninsular defense while Japan supports broader blockade-breaking efforts. Both states face escalatory risks from hosting US military operations. The report concludes that while deterring such a dual contingency remains optimal (notably through Taiwan's successful development of a "hedgehog" strategy), failure to establish detailed contingency plans with Japan and South Korea beforehand could prove catastrophic, potentially reshaping East Asian security architecture and the rules governing 21st-century great power conflict.

Introduction

East Asia is one of the most strategically contested and militarily sensitive regions in the world. In Northeast Asia, the United States, Japan, and South Korea are allied in a bloc countering China, North Korea, and Russia. At the juncture of Northeast and Southeast Asia, de facto independent Taiwan is largely aligned with Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul, but faces broad diplomatic isolation and a deteriorating military balance with revisionist China. Nonetheless, despite these frictions the above polities are deeply economically intertwined, even if partial trade fragmentation is occurring through selective supply chain de-coupling, increased tariffs, and other international commerce barriers.¹

Taken together, the East Asia region's major blocs have increasingly incompatible strategic interests, security/defense postures, and perceptions of the sources of their prosperity. Consequently, they are at risk of security dilemma dynamics and a shifting balance of power upending a mostly stable, peaceful post-Cold War status quo based on shared belief in robust deterrence and economic interdependence.

Two potential flashpoints stand out as particularly problematic in this regard. The first is Chinese military action against Taiwan, especially a maritime blockade scenario intended to compel capitulation by Taipei.² The second major flashpoint risk is North Korean revisionism via limited-scale attacks, especially against South Korea-controlled islands near the de facto inter-Korean maritime border (the Northern Limit Line (NLL)). Many analysts see this latter possibility as more likely to occur in conjunction with a Taiwan contingency, either through deliberate China-North Korea coordination or via North Korea exploiting a China-Taiwan contingency to opportunistically advance its interests while the US would be focused on the Taiwan Strait.

Given the current balance of power in the region, US involvement would be necessary in either scenario,

and especially if Beijing and Pyongyang cooperated in their respective coercive endeavors. Notably, going beyond diplomacy and crisis management, the US would be required for critical missions implicated in both the Taiwan maritime blockade and North Korean maritime revisionism scenarios. Considering the distances involved, the complex geography, and likely need for rapid, decisive action, this raises the issue of critical mission preparedness. What potential threats should be prioritized? What strategies, operations, and assets would be necessary? How should the US and East Asian regional allies coordinate pre-crisis to increase the likelihood of a coherent, effective response?

This policy paper outlines selected regional security dynamics and identifies items and actions that would contribute to preparedness for such a dual contingency scenario.³ Following this Introduction, part 1 examines Chinese strategic objectives vis-à-vis Taiwan; current US interests, commitments, and strategic posture in East Asia; and some of the dilemmas that US allies in Northeast Asia would face during a China-Taiwan contingency. Part 2 looks at a possible Taiwan maritime blockade scenario, how that might be paired with North Korean action along the NLL, and critical mission responses by the US, South Korea, and Japan. A particular focus is on expected challenges and proactive steps that could be taken to mitigate them. Part 3 provides a conclusion.

US-China Regional Great Power Competition and Its Ripple Effects

China as Rising Power: China has steadily transformed into a near-peer military competitor to the US, particularly in the maritime domain. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) now outnumbers the US Navy in terms of vessels, although the US still has an advantage (albeit shrinking) in gross tonnage (notably due to the US's much larger aircraft carrier fleet) and overall technological superiority (including more guided-missile cruisers and destroyers, and world-leading

¹ Zhong Feiteng, "The Growing Impact of Decoupling on Japan, South Korea and China." *Global Asia*, 2024, 19/3: 32-36. <https://www.globalasia.org/v19no3/cover/the-growing-impact-of-decoupling-on-japan-south-korea-and-china-zhong-feiteng>; Alicia Garcia-Herrero, "Escalating US-China rare earth tensions signal determination to decouple." *Bruegel*, Oct. 15, 2025. <https://www.bruegel.org/first-glance/escalating-us-china-rare-earth-tensions-signal-determination-decouple>

² A full invasion is also possible, as is a small-scale seizure of Taiwan administered islands—Kinmen, Matsu, etc.—near the mainland China coast. These scenarios are not considered in this work, although a Chinese blockade could fit into either scenario. It is also possible that China is risk-averse and simply maintains the status quo.

³ This policy paper is partially based on the outcomes of a table-top exercise carried out in Seoul in mid-2025. Participants included experts from the US, the US's Indo-Pacific and European allies and partners, and other relevant states.

attack and ballistic missile submarine fleet).⁴ China also has a much larger coast guard, merchant marine, and shipbuilding industrial base than the US.⁵ Although the East Asia theater is predominantly maritime, the role of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is also crucial to potential warfighting in the region, as holding contested territory—such as in Taiwan—would require ground forces. China's maritime and ground capabilities are in turn supported by sophisticated and growing air, rocket/missile, space, and cyber/information forces.

As US force projection in East Asia must occur at great distance from US territory (the US west coast, Hawaii, Guam), and significant distance from the territory of US allies in the region (South Korea, Japan, Philippines, Australia), the Chinese military focuses on an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy combining integrated joint operations and (especially) long-range precision strike systems by the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), which operates the world's largest ground-based ballistic missile force, including large numbers of short and medium/intermediate range conventional rockets/missiles in addition to a large (500+ warhead) and growing nuclear weapons arsenal.⁶ The PLARF's ability to strike US surface combatant ships is intended to make US military intervention in the region a difficult and risky endeavor.

Beijing views Taiwan as a core national interest, and, with increasing assertiveness under paramount leader Xi Jinping, China has signaled that it may use force to achieve unification, if other methods fail.⁷ On the basis of the aforementioned maritime- and air-based A2/AD strategy, a likely first step would be a blockade progressively cutting off Taiwan's sea and (and perhaps) air links to force political capitulation without direct invasion.⁸ China would intend that

such a measure would be decisive, a *fait accompli* undermining US resolve to the point that it would not risk intervention, in turn also discouraging Japan and/or South Korea. Additionally, this would signal the end of US military primacy in the western Pacific.

US Commitment to East Asia: The US has held military primacy in East Asia since the end of World War II, and remains notionally committed to that status, despite significant relative erosion vis-à-vis China.⁹ In this context, the US operates treaty-based alliances in Northeast Asia with South Korea and Japan, and maintains a policy of strategic ambiguity regarding commitment to defending Taiwan under the framework of the Taiwan Relations Act.¹⁰ Although this stops short of a formal security guarantee, most analysts believe that the US would attempt to support Taiwan militarily in the case of Chinese invasion or blockade, as failing to do so would have direct (economic) and indirect (alliance credibility) impact on US regional and global power. That is, most analysts believe that the US would consider Chinese aggression toward Taiwan as a threat to vital US interests.

The reality, however, is that such support would be fraught due to Beijing's aforementioned maritime- and air-based A2/AD strategy. In a China-Taiwan contingency, the US would need to conduct complex activities, including:

- Diplomatic action, featuring economic sanctions coordinated with US allies/partners.
- Transporting matériel into the region (leading to RSOI), notably air and naval assets, with selected stationing on allied territory.
- Challenging potential blockade operations.

⁴ Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for US Naval Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, April 24, 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33153>

⁵ Stu Woo, "Chinese Ships are Carrying America's Cargo: The US Wants to Reverse That," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2025. <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-cargo-ship-trump-shipbuilding-823b1c9c>

⁶ Christopher Johnstone, "China's Evolving Counter Intervention Capabilities and Implications for the United States and Indo-Pacific Allies and Partners," Congressional Testimony, March 21, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-evolving-counter-intervention-capabilities-and-implications-united-states-and-indo>; CSIS China Power Project, "How is China Modernizing its Nuclear Forces?" CSIS, 2025, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-nuclear-weapons/>

⁷ Joe Cash and Ben Blanchard, "China won't renounce use of force over Taiwan; Xi visits frontline island," Reuters, Oct. 17, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-says-it-will-not-renounce-use-force-over-taiwan-2024-10-16/>

⁸ Mark Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "Lights Out?: Wargaming a Chinese Blockade of Taiwan," CSIS, July 31, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lights-out-wargaming-chinese-blockade-taiwan>

⁹ Melanie Sisson and Dan Patt, "After primacy: US military options in contemporary East Asia," Brookings, Dec. 20, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/after-primacy-us-military-options-in-contemporary-east-asia/>

¹⁰ In the broader Indo-Pacific, the US operates treaty-based alliances with the Philippines, Australia, and Thailand. Although beyond the scope of this policy paper, these alliances—especially the Philippines and Australia—might also potentially play a role in a Taiwan crisis. For example, see: David Sacks, "Mapping the Unknown and Thinking the Unthinkable: How US Allies Might Respond in a Crisis Over Taiwan." East-West Center—Occasional Paper, January 2024, https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/OP%203_Sacks_01092023.pdf

- Domestic and international information operations.
- Cyber, space, and hybrid (e.g., undersea cable) domain operations.
- Interdicting Chinese kinetic air and maritime operations, as well as mitigating possible rocket/missile attack.
- Simultaneous deterrence of or response to North Korean aggression (either opportunistic or coordinated with China), notably along the Northern Limit Line (NLL).

US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), as well as United States Forces Korea (USFK) and United States Forces Japan (USFJ), have been reorienting their forces around such scenarios.¹¹ The focus is to increase survivability and operational tempo under contested conditions, emphasizing distributed maritime and air operations supported by joint all-domain command and control (JADC2). However, preparation for this is complicated by the US global security role (which distracts attention and employs scarce platforms/systems), as well as a high current operational load that aims at maintaining deterrence and warfighting readiness in the present at the potential expense of pre-positioning assets for future conflicts.

South Korean and Japanese Dilemmas: South Korea, and to a lesser degree Japan, are caught between their security and defense alliances with the US and their relations with China. In the first place, South Korea's and Japan's economies still depend enormously on China, despite partial de-coupling. Moreover, Beijing has the ability—albeit limited—to enable or restrain Pyongyang's aggression toward Seoul and Tokyo. China is also quietly beginning a hybrid warfare strategy in the Yellow Sea (seemingly following a similar approach as in the South China Sea), and has for more than a decade already been in disputes with Japan over maritime territory in the East China Sea.¹² In sum, China is a critical part of South Korean and Japanese economic success, but also an unavoidable neighbor capable of posing significant challenges to

their security, prosperity, and even territorial integrity.

A China-Taiwan contingency would confront both South Korea and Japan with difficult choices. The diplomatic response would likely be rhetorically firm, but joining economic sanctions would carry risks in terms of both market/supply-chain disruption and escalation potential. Even more fraught would be the issues connected with a possible US military response. Would Seoul and Tokyo allow US assets to move into theater and be staged on their territory? Would they allow the US to use ports and airfields as a part of a possible military response to a Chinese blockade of Taiwan? Would they actively join US efforts—ranging from intelligence, cyber, and space-based collaboration to kinetic contributions—to break the blockade? How would they defend themselves against potential Chinese kinetic escalation? In these scenarios, how would they deter and, if necessary, counter opportunistic North Korean aggression?

Taiwan Contingency: Chinese Blockade and US-led Response

A Chinese-initiated blockade of Taiwan would be a high-risk strategy designed to force political submission without the cost and even higher risk of amphibious invasion. Given current US rhetoric, strategic focus, and military posture, such a move would likely trigger intervention by Washington, possibly entailing wider escalation.

The US would face significant operational challenges, however, including:

- Countering China's A2/AD envelope, which stretches across the first island chain.
- Ensuring secure logistics supply lines and air/maritime access.
- Mobilizing joint force assets quickly, including especially carrier strike groups, missiles, long-range bombers, uncrewed aerial and underwater vehicles, and missile defense platforms.

¹¹ Markus Garlauskas, "Focus on dual deterrence, not headcount, for transforming US Forces Korea," Atlantic Council, Sept. 9, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/focus-on-dual-deterrence-not-headcount-for-transforming-us-forces-k>; Matthew Olay, Defense Secretary Announces US Forces Japan's Upgrade to Joint Force Command, *DOD News*, March 30, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4139213/defense-secretary-announces-us-forces-japans-upgrade-to-joint-force-command/>; Xavier Brunson, "Gen Xavier Brunson Holds Press Briefing," United States Forces Korea—Speeches and Transcripts, Aug. 10, 2025, <https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press->

<Products/Speeches-Transcripts/Article/4270708/gen-xavier-brunson-holds-press-briefing/>

¹² Sheila Smith, "A Sino-Japanese Clash in the East China Sea," Council on Foreign Relations—Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 18, April 2013. <https://www.cfr.org/report/sino-japanese-clash-east-china-sea/>; Roh Suk-jo and Kim Dong-hyun, "Seoul demands removal of Chinese platforms in Yellow Sea; Beijing claims they're legal fish farms." *Chosun Daily*, April 25, 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/04/25/WSYW3BGQGRDYNH52WFNNNGI14/>

- Leveraging its own and allied territory and capabilities, stretching potentially from northern Australia to the Philippines and Guam, as well as the Japanese archipelago (including especially the southwestern islands) and the Korean Peninsula.
- Countering multi-domain disruption, including PLA cyber operations, electronic warfare (jamming/blinding/dazzling/spoofing/etc.), and space asset attacks.
- Accounting for potential multi-front conflict, notably North Korean opportunism (or even pre-meditated coordination with China) as well as Russian escalation in Europe.

Across numerous critical areas, the US should be ready for a Taiwan-blockade/North Korea-aggression dual crisis in ways that require advance preparation for critical missions.

(a) Pre-Crisis and Early Crisis Response: Strategic Deterrence, Ally Reassurance, and Action Below the Military Threshold

During a pre- and early-crisis phase, US tasks and objectives should include the following:

- ◎ Maintaining deterrence in the nuclear and conventional domains vis-à-vis China and North Korea via appropriate signaling, including redlines that it can and is willing to defend. Deterring a blockade is better than countering one.
- ◎ Assisting, to the extent possible, Taiwan in the continuation of its establishment of a viable strategy for resisting blockade, including both stockpiling stores of necessary inputs for industry and the civilian population, and acquiring requisite military systems (anti-ship missiles, drones, coastal defense platforms, inter alia).
- ◎ Encouraging and assisting (if necessary) Japan and the Philippines in efforts to prepare their islands near Taiwan (respectively the Ryukyus in the East China Sea and the Batanes south of the Bashi Channel) to serve as military outposts with systems that could put at risk Chinese vessels engaged in blockade. The idea would be to deter blockade by making it difficult for China to gain maritime access to the waters east of Taiwan.

◎ Prior to any Taiwan crisis, the US should communicate with allies—e.g., South Korea and Japan, as well as the Philippines and Australia—regarding intended US action under various scenarios. This should include, to the extent possible, clarification of US intentions vis-à-vis both defense of Taiwan and South Korea in the event of North Korean attack along the NLL. Critically, such discussion would also necessitate planning regarding cooperation (including military cooperation) the US would require from allies to meet strategic objectives.

◎ If a Chinese blockade of Taiwan emerges, the US should ensure that domestic political messaging is resilient vis-à-vis Chinese information operations seeking to influence Washington's decision-making in a way contrary to US interests. US allies and partners should be encouraged to do the same.

◎ If a Chinese blockade of Taiwan emerges, the US should engage in concerted effort—in cooperation with allies and partners—to isolate China diplomatically across a range of multilateral organizations.

◎ If a Chinese blockade of Taiwan emerges, the US should create—in cooperation with allies and partners—a sanctions regime that puts maximum pressure on the Chinese ability to (a) export goods supporting labor employment critical to the social stability that undergirds CCP power, and (b) import critical inputs for industry (especially military-focused industry) and consumption. The latter measure should target a broad swath of selected technologies and international financial market access. Secondary sanctions should be a part of the package to reduce Beijing's ability to circumvent primary sanctions.

(b) Non-kinetic Military Response: ISR, Cyber, and Space Cooperation

If restoration of deterrence fails and a Chinese-initiated blockade of Taiwan persists, the US will need the military support of allies and partners. At a minimum, this would require cooperation—determined and practiced in advance, to the extent possible—in non-kinetic, strategy-enabling activities, such as:

◎ Intelligence collection and sharing (among allies) targeted toward all relevant activities of China and North Korea, both with respect to the blockade as

well as further rungs on the escalation ladder. This is especially true of operational signals and human intelligence regarding adversary capabilities and leadership intentions, military and military-relevant asset deployments/staging and movements, and (were conflict to escalate) data necessary for targeting and missile defense.

◎ Cyber operations aiming to both defend US and allied (including Taiwan) data and networks and offensively threaten those of China and North Korea. This is an important mission, especially as China's "system of systems" conflict strategy focuses on degrading adversaries' information environment, and thus decision-making and decision-execution.¹³ This has already been incorporated into US plans for fighting a war against China but is also necessary for the lower-intensity case of a Taiwan blockade. Countering China's "system of systems" approach necessitates a blend of both cyber defense and offense operations in which US comprehensive cyber domain strengths are reinforced with the selected strengths of allies and partners. Successful offensive cyber operations may require pre-positioning of code on Chinese networks, while defensive operations will be focused on robust network protection and redundancy.

◎ Space cooperation, e.g., coordinated allied satellite usage as well as measures to degrade the usability of Chinese satellites.

(c) Blockade-Breaking and Preparation for Imminent Military Conflict

Once a Chinese maritime blockade of Taiwan is underway, the operational emphasis of the US and its allies and partners should be on two critical missions: (i) mitigating the impact of the blockade's effects, while also attempting to fundamentally break the blockade through challenging Chinese resolve to enforce it; (ii) preparing for military escalation through pre-positioning assets in the theater of potential conflict.

These two missions should involve the following tasks:

◎ Noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO): The US and its allies and partners (South Korea, Japan, Philippines, Australia, as well as possibly other states) will likely want to evacuate their civilian citizens from Taiwan to the extent possible. The primary means for doing so would likely be commandeered civilian air transport, as well as military aircraft where/when possible. This will require coordination both among themselves and with Taiwanese authorities. This assumes that China will not attempt to close the airspace over Taiwan, which might occur (and the response to which would require planning) as a part of escalating tensions.

◎ Establishment of a humanitarian airbridge to Taiwan: The US and its allies and partners should prepare to supply Taiwan with food assistance, medical and pharmaceutical supplies, portable generators/batteries and other energy assistance, and other selected production inputs and consumption goods. This will require the use of allied and partner airports and airfields. Goods airlifted to Taiwan will by necessity be limited, and thus Taiwanese pre-crisis stocks of food, energy (e.g., coal and gas), and other critical goods and inputs will be essential to withstanding a maritime blockade.

◎ Blockade-testing/Blockade-breaking: The US and its allies and partners, as well as Taiwan itself, should prepare to use merchant marine vessels to test and break a Chinese blockade to restore normal maritime traffic to/from Taiwan. This may start with test runs of unaccompanied cargo vessels, but if these are stopped and/or boarded by Chinese naval or coast guard vessels and crews, blockade-breaking runs will require naval and coast guard escorts. This would feed into an escalation dynamic leading toward open military conflict, with the most obvious spark being an armed confrontation and maritime skirmish during a blockade-breaking attempt.

◎ Pre-conflict positioning of military assets in the theater of potential operations: In the lead-up to—and continuing into the early phases of—a Chinese maritime blockade of Taiwan, it will be necessary for the US to cooperate with allies and partners to move the necessary military assets inside the first island chain. Failing to do so could decisively place the US at a military disadvantage if the blockade were to

¹³ Dakota Cary, "China's National Cybersecurity Center: A Base for Military-Civil Fusion in the Cyber Domain." Center for Security and Emerging Technology (Georgetown University), July 2021, [https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/chinas-national-cybersecurity-](https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/chinas-national-cybersecurity-center/)

[center/](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1535-1.html); Mark Cozad et al. 2023, "Gaining Victory in Systems Warfare: China's Perspective on the US-China Military Balance," RAND, March 1, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1535-1.html

escalate to kinetic conflict, since China's A2/AD capabilities would weaken and disrupt logistics and supply lines necessary for supporting US and allied fighting units. The list of systems, platforms, and matériel needed in such a scenario is too long to catalogue here, but includes: Fuel, munitions of all varieties, spare parts, unmanned aerial and underwater vehicles, bombers, fighter jets, reconnaissance aircraft, refueling aircraft, attack and transport helicopters, carrier strike groups, attack and ballistic-missile submarines, anti-submarine warfare assets, sea mining/de-mining ships, undersea cable repair ships, and missile defense systems.

Some of these assets and the soldiers to operate them can be stationed in Guam, but it is not invulnerable to Chinese missile strikes. Moreover, its location on the second island chain is still distant enough from Taiwan that it does not completely solve the Chinese A2/AD challenge for the first island chain. The US thus would need support from partners and allies, notably South Korea and Japan, as well as the Philippines and possibly Singapore and Australia, as locations for staging mission-critical military assets at bases, ports, and airfields. This would appear to be an escalatory step, however, about which some allies and partners are likely to be skeptical. It is thus advisable that the US and its partners and allies hold military exercises (both bilateral and multilateral) that serve as a pretext for bringing the aforementioned assets into the theater. After the exercises, the assets should remain on station or otherwise be deployed within the first island chain. Along with this effort, the US government would need to secure agreement that it could use those assets—based at allied ports and airfields—if conflict with China were to escalate.

With respect to the above missions in preparation for US-China military escalation growing from a China-initiated blockade of Taiwan, US allies will have differential responsibilities and tasks, if a Taiwan contingency is paired with a crisis on the Korean Peninsula initiated by North Korea. To begin with, the emerging consensus is that US-China military escalation would require South Korea to take on a much greater burden for its conventional defense against potential North Korean belligerence than might be the case under conditions of other, stand-alone North Korean contingencies. Consequently, South Korea could have less operational involvement in blockade-breaking than Japan, if Seoul and

Washington determined that South Korean air, naval, merchant marine, and other assets would be better used around the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, both Japan and South Korea would take on considerable retaliatory risk in allowing the US to use their ports and airfields for military operations (stockpiling, staging, MRO, etc.) in countering a Chinese blockade, and even more so if they participated themselves. They would need to weigh that risk—and how it might incentivize North Korean adventurism—against the risk that their withheld or limited support for the US would contribute to Washington's inability to dislodge Beijing from its Taiwan blockade. To the extent possible, this calculus should be carried out before hostilities commence.

Conclusion

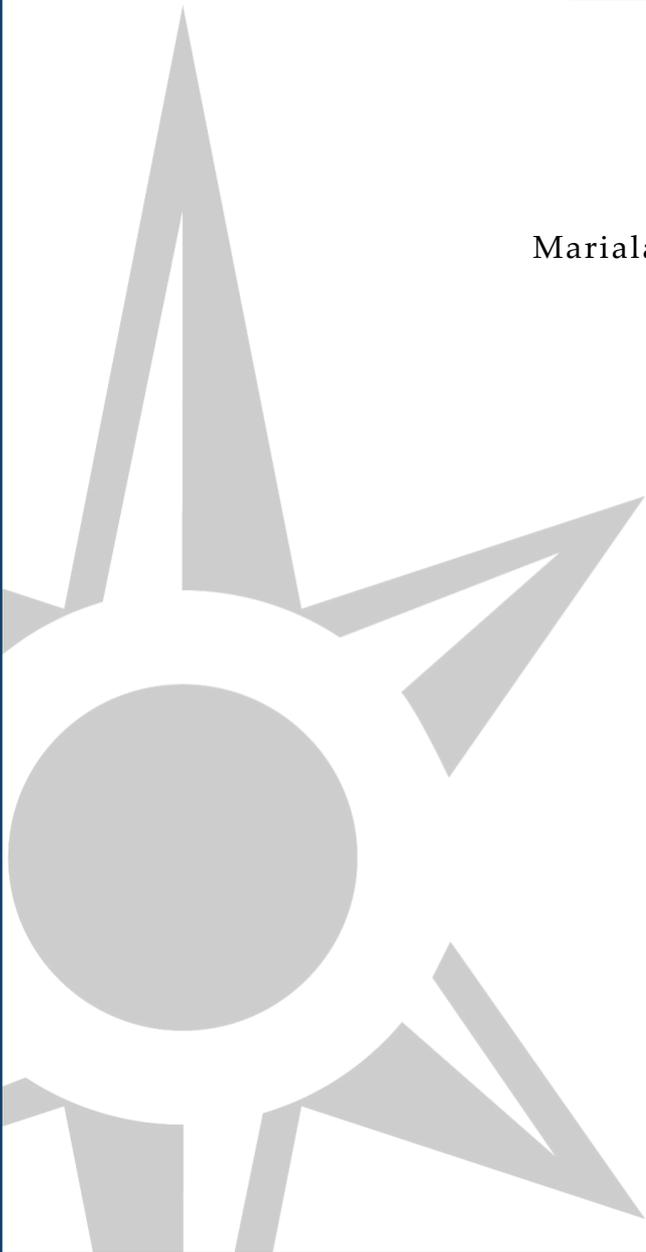
A China-Taiwan crisis coupled with opportunistic or pre-meditated North Korean aggression would test the strategic resolve and operational readiness of the US, South Korea, Japan, and other allies. It is also critical that Taiwan prepares itself according to a hedgehog strategy. Success or failure in such a scenario would not just reshape East Asia—but potentially rewrite the rules of 21st-century conflict. While each actor has prepared for high-end conflict, the complexity of a dual contingency necessitates improved interoperability, faster decision-making, and multi-domain resilience. Given the challenges involved, deterring a dual Taiwan-Korea crisis is the optimal course of action, but if deterrence fails then contingency planning with Japan and South Korea needs to already be in place. The missions described above are not comprehensive and are tailored to only one potential course of events (Taiwan blockade), but they are critically important, and likely to overlap with steps necessary in other potential series of events.

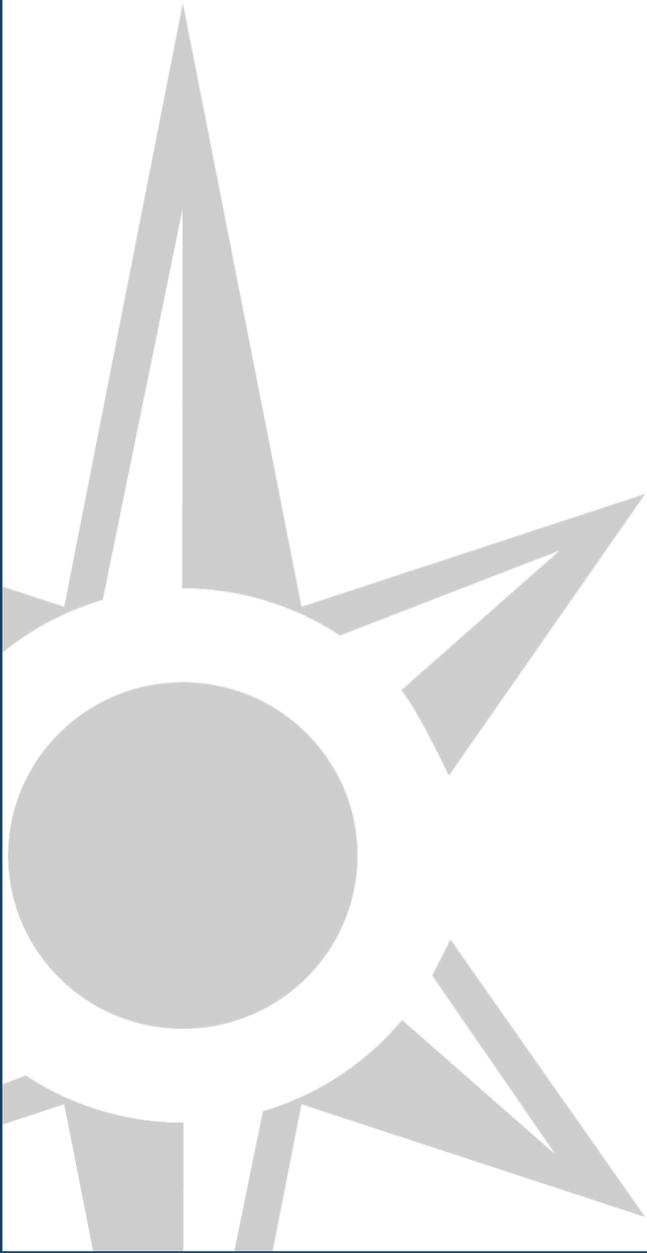
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MASON RICHEY is Associate Professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, South Korea), and Senior Contributor at the Asia Society (Korea). Dr. Richey has also held positions as a POSCO Visiting Research Fellow at the East-West Center (Honolulu, HI) and a DAAD Scholar at the University of Potsdam. His research focuses on U.S. and European foreign and security policy as applied to the Asia-Pacific. Recent scholarly articles have appeared (inter alia) in *Pacific Review*, *Asian Security*, *Global Governance*, and *Foreign Policy Analysis*. Shorter analyses and opinion pieces have been published in *38North*, *War on the Rocks*, *Le Monde*, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Forbes*, among other venues. He is co-editor of the volume *The Future of the Korean Peninsula: Korea 2032* (Routledge, forthcoming 2021).

Framing the Impasse: Breaking the Narrative Deadlock in US–North Korea Diplomacy

By
Marialaura De Angelis





Executive Summary

Marialaura De Angelis

For over three decades, US attempts to negotiate peace and denuclearization with North Korea have followed a predictable pattern: promising openings, rising expectations, and eventual collapse. These repeated failures are often attributed to mismatched interests, unrealistic demands, or issues of sequencing. Such explanations, however, overlook a deeper problem—one that remains largely unexamined. This is the psycho-culturally rooted strategic narratives that entrench each side in mutually exclusive worldviews, dooming diplomacy from the outset.

The Trump–Kim summitry diplomacy of 2018–2019 was no exception. The Singapore summit marked a moment of extraordinary diplomatic opportunity, yet the breakdown of talks at the 2019 summits in Hanoi and Panmunjom exposed the deeper disconnect between Washington and Pyongyang. The prospect of Trump returning to the presidency briefly raised hopes of renewed US–North Korea engagement. But in the years since Hanoi, the space for such engagement has narrowed considerably. Following the collapse of talks with Trump and Moon, Kim Jong Un appears to have fundamentally redefined North Korea’s foreign policy and strategic goals and continues to signal a deliberate policy of distancing from both Washington and Seoul, even with pro-engagement administrations back in both capitals.

Understanding what ultimately doomed the Trump–Kim negotiations is critical to formulate a new engagement strategy. The collapse of diplomacy in 2019 was not merely a matter of tactical miscalculation or diverging interests; rather, it stemmed from an overreliance on the same clashing negotiating frameworks that have undermined diplomatic engagement for decades and continue to do so today. Grasping Kim’s foreign policy shift and its implications—including how to re-engage under these new circumstances—requires confronting the deeper disconnect that has long blocked US–DPRK diplomacy and ultimately shaped this shift.

Without addressing these underlying dynamics, it is impossible to explain why talks broke down in Hanoi and why Kim Jong Un now refuses to re-engage with both Washington and Seoul. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to determine how to restart negotiations, but to critically reexamine the history of US–DPRK relations and rethink the entire paradigm of engagement.

Introduction

For over three decades, U.S. attempts to negotiate peace and denuclearization with North Korea have followed a predictable pattern: promising openings, rising expectations, and eventual collapse. These repeated failures are often attributed to mismatched interests, unrealistic demands, or issues of sequencing. Such explanations, however, overlook a deeper problem—one that remains largely unexamined. This is the psycho-culturally rooted strategic narratives that entrench each side in mutually exclusive worldviews, dooming diplomacy from the outset.

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both Washington and Seoul. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to determine how to restart negotiations, but to critically reexamine the history of U.S.–DPRK relations and rethink the entire paradigm of engagement.

Clash of Frameworks: Postcolonial Identity vs. Moral Order in U.S.–DPRK Engagement

In most conflicts, parties assume they understand what the dispute is about. That assumption is often mistaken. Rarely do adversaries agree on the origins of the conflict, who is involved, or what resolution would entail. Each side constructs a strategic narrative—a coherent story grounded in its history, values, and political identity—to explain its actions and define its objectives. These narratives shape not only diplomacy but the structure of negotiations themselves.

When two sides come to the table with clashing narratives, negotiations become a game where players unknowingly follow different rulebooks.¹ Each side assumes its own framework is the legitimate one, leading both to perceive that the other is breaking the rules and negotiating in bad faith. This dynamic has undermined every U.S.–D.P.R.K. negotiation attempt since the early 2000s.

Same Table, Different Negotiations

The U.S. and North Korea may sit across the same negotiation table, but they do so with fundamentally different conceptions of what they are negotiating. North Korea does not view negotiations as a disarmament process. It comes to the table to end the Korean War and redefine its relationship with the United States — a bid for survival, legitimacy, strategic equality, and the chance for an international breakthrough. US negotiators, meanwhile, remain focused on denuclearization through pressure and sanctions, constrained by a decades-old nonproliferation framework rooted in a moral and legal order that defines North Korea as a rogue actor to be brought into compliance.

These competing frameworks are the product of clashing worldviews—Pyongyang’s revolutionary narrative of postcolonial resistance and inherited

¹ Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World*, rev. ed. (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

struggle and Washington's belief in American moral leadership of the rules-based order.

North Korea's Strategic Narrative: The Guerrilla State and Chosŏn Minjok

North Korea's negotiating posture with the United States is shaped by two overlapping historical narratives: the myth of the *Guerrilla State* and the ideology of *Chosŏn Minjok*—the Korean ethnic nation.² Together, these narratives offer both a justification for the regime's existence and a roadmap for its engagement with the world.³ The nuclear program and confrontation with the U.S. are framed as extensions of a long-standing struggle for independence, sovereignty, and recognition on the global stage — a struggle rooted in the legacy of the Korean War.

The Guerrilla State and U.S. hostility

The Guerrilla State narrative draws heavily on the legacy of anti-colonial resistance. North Korea's national identity is deeply rooted in the collective trauma of Japanese occupation—its own version of "Never Again." The loss of independence is seen as the country's foundational wound, and that continues to shape its foreign policy today. From Pyongyang's perspective, that loss stemmed from insufficient military strength, making a strong defense—ultimately, a nuclear deterrent—essential to preserving sovereignty and dignity.

This historical experience informs North Korea's self-image as a "guerrilla state," forged through Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese resistance. His leadership during that struggle became the blueprint for North Korea's institutions and ideology, casting the ongoing confrontation with the United States as a direct continuation of the independence fight. Kim Jong Un is portrayed as carrying forward his grandfather's historical mission—now redefined

through the lens of what North Koreans see as enduring U.S. "hostility." In this narrative, the regime's legitimacy is inseparable from the Kim family's inherited duty to defend the nation's sovereignty and dignity against the imperialist threat of great powers.⁴

North Korea's identity as a Guerrilla State is sustained by a siege mentality in which the Korean War never truly ended.⁵ What the regime describes as ongoing U.S. efforts to undermine its sovereignty ("U.S. hostility") turns the peninsula into a perpetual battlefield—one that justifies a constant of mobilization and a posture of defiance.⁶ For this reason, Pyongyang has long insisted that there would "never be the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula... until the US rolls back its hostile policy and a lasting and durable peace mechanism is in place."⁷

Korean Exceptionalism and Obsession with Equality

Alongside this defiant postcolonial narrative runs a second, more aspirational one: *Chosŏn Minjok*. This vision of Korean ethnic exceptionalism⁸ rejects the notion of North Korea as a rogue state and asserts instead that the nation, under the guidance of the Kim family, is destined for global respect and recognition. This narrative helps explain North Korea's fixation on status and respect, particularly in negotiations with the U.S.⁹

Here, the nuclear program is not just a shield, but a badge of equality. In North Korea's narrative, nuclear status confers more than mere survival — it embodies independence, sovereignty, and legitimacy on the global stage.¹⁰ It affirms Pyongyang's claim to equality with the world's greatest powers — especially Washington — including the sovereign right to possess nuclear weapons. In Pyongyang's view, "if the D.P.R.K. sits at a table with the U.S., it has to be a dialogue between nuclear weapon states,

² Heonik Kwan and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

³ Eric Ballbach, "The History of the Present: Foundational Meta-Narratives in Contemporary North Korean Discourse," *S/N Korean Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2015): 79-100, <https://doi.org/10.17783/IHU.2015.1.2.79>.

⁴ Kwon and Chung, *Beyond Charismatic Politics*.

⁵ The Korean War has never officially ended. Fighting ceased with the 1953 armistice, but no formal peace treaty was ever signed, leaving the conflict frozen to this day.

⁶ Bomi Kim, "North Korea's Siege Mentality: A Sociopolitical Analysis of the Kim Jong-un Regime's Foreign Policies," *Asian Perspective* 40, No. 2 (2016): 223-243, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44074779>.

⁷ "Report on 5th Plenary of 7th C.C., WPK" Korea Central News Agency, January 1, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1577829999-473709661/report-on-5th-plenary-meeting-of-7th-c-c-wpk/>.

⁸ B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters*, (Melville House, 2010), <https://archive.org/details/cleanestracehown00myer/mode/2up>; B.R. Myers,

"The Cleanest Race," *New York Times*, January 26, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/28/books/excerpt-cleanest-race.html>.

⁹ Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Eric J. Ballbach, "North Korea: Between Autonomy-Seeking and the Pursuit of Influence," in *Facets of the North Korean Conflict: Actors, Problems and Europe's Interests* (German Institute for International and Security Affairs Berlin, 2018), 11-16.

not one side forcing the other to dismantle nuclear weapons.”¹¹ Should North Korea ever agree to engage in denuclearization talks, it will do so as a calculated strategic decision — not as a concession that its nuclear ambitions are illegitimate.

North Korea Negotiating Framework: Normalization through Denuclearization

As a result of these strategic narratives, North Korea’s negotiating framework intricately links its nuclear weapons program with its relationship with the United States. These elements are not merely interconnected; they are two sides of the same coin. The ‘Guerrilla State’ narrative frames the U.S. as a perpetual adversary, rendering nuclear weapons essential for the regime’s survival. In contrast, the Chosŏn Minjok vision looks to a future in which North Korea attains economic development and international prestige through breakthrough diplomacy with Washington, with nuclear weapons positioned as the principal bargaining tool.

Overestimating the Power of the Relationship

For North Korea, the central issue of conflict with the United States is not its nuclear arsenal but the adversarial nature of the bilateral relationship itself. From Pyongyang’s perspective, as long as hostility persists, giving up its nuclear weapons will not resolve its conflict with Washington, as “if there were not the nuclear issue, the US would find fault with another thing we do, and its military and political threat would not cease.”¹²

North Korea therefore sees little incentive to disarm. Security guarantees, sanctions relief, and economic incentives are viewed as inherently reversible—subject to the volatility of U.S. elections or shifts in political will. The fate of Libya, the collapse of the Iran nuclear deal, and the U.S. withdrawal from major international agreements all reinforce North Korea’s skepticism. As Wendy Sherman, lead U.S. negotiator on the Iran deal, observed in 2016, “The only thing that creates an iron-clad guarantee to durability is that it remains in everybody’s self-interest to do so.”¹³

Similarly, Pyongyang believes that if U.S.–DPRK relations were genuinely transformed—if hostility gave way to trust—Washington would cease to view its nuclear weapons as a threat, and pressure for denuclearization would naturally diminish. This, in Pyongyang’s view, might even allow it to retain its arsenal, offering yet another reason not to make permanent concessions in the early phases of negotiations.

Denuclearization as Leverage to Transform the Relationship

For Pyongyang, the bilateral relationship is both the problem and the solution, making it the central focus of negotiations with Washington.

Within the vision that transforming relations with the United States was the pathway to ensure regime survival, end the decades-long siege created by what the North Koreans see as US “imperialist threats,” and achieve Pyongyang’s long-term goals—where an official end to the Korean War and normalization with Washington and Seoul were expected to lift international isolation, unlock sanctions relief, attract foreign investment, and enable South Korea–style development—the nuclear program served both as an equalizer and as Pyongyang’s primary leverage. It allowed Kim to sit at the table as an equal and to use nuclear capability to pursue ambitious goals for the regime and the country.

U.S. Strategic narrative: the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Indispensable Nation

For the U.S., this has never been a bilateral issue between equals. While North Korea’s approach to negotiations with the United States is rooted in the legacy of the Korean War, Washington’s perspective stems from the first nuclear crisis and the subsequent diplomatic efforts of the early 1990s. As a result, the U.S. frames the issue from the broader lens of multilateral non-proliferation frameworks, situating these negotiations within its role as guarantor of the post-war international order.

¹¹ “Rodong Sinmun Urges U.S. to Give Clear Answer to Just Demand of DPRK,” *Korea Central News Agency*, April 24, 2013, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451895822-157628593/rodong-sinmun-urges-u-s-to-give-clear-answer-to-just-demand-of-dprk/>

¹² “Report on 5th Plenary.”

¹³ Wendy Sherman, “Lead Negotiator Wendy Sherman Explains the Iran Nuclear Deal,” moderated by Robert S. Litwak, *Rewind*, Wilson Center, March 10, 2016. Video, 6 min., 10 sec., <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/lead-negotiator-wendy-sherman-explains-the-iran-nuclear-deal>.

NPT framework

For Washington, talks with North Korea were originally framed as non-proliferation negotiations, like those it held with Libya and Iran. When Pyongyang withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to develop nuclear weapons, it was cast as a rogue actor and effectively expelled from the U.S.-led international order. As such, recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state would appear to reward bad behavior and risk encouraging others to follow suit—particularly South Korea, which might question the value of remaining in a system that fails to safeguard its interests.

Framing these negotiations as interactions between the U.S. — the global enforcer — and North Korea, labelled a “criminal” state for failing to uphold its NPT commitments, has shaped concrete policy decisions across multiple U.S. administrations. From Bush’s “Axis of Evil” doctrine to Obama’s “strategic patience” and Trump’s summitry diplomacy, Washington has oscillated between engagement and containment but has never abandoned the idea that North Korea must disarm as a precondition for legitimacy. The underlying message has remained constant: disarmament is a moral obligation, not a bargaining chip.

American Exceptionalism and the Indispensable Nation

The NPT framing deeply embeds this issue in a moral framework central to American national identity, where a country like North Korea is the inferior, less legitimate party that must fall in line with the U.S.-led international order.

This narrative is underpinned by the enduring logic of American exceptionalism: the belief that the United States, as a “city upon a hill” and “beacon of hope,” has a unique moral authority and duty to lead the world. It is not only the “greatest country in the world,” it is the most powerful nation. It is, in Madeleine Albright’s words, “the indispensable nation,” essential for upholding the post-war international order and defending it against authoritarian threats. Since 1945, the U.S. has framed its role as one of a benevolent hegemon and global policeman. From the Axis powers of World War II to the Communist bloc of the Cold War and the post-

9/11 Axis of Evil, America has cast itself as the defender of freedom, fighting oppressive adversaries.

The Manichean Divide

The U.S. role as the world’s moral lighthouse and defender of the international rules-based system is grounded in a Manichean worldview that divides the world into allies and enemies, friends and foes, like-minded partners and rogue states, leaving little room for neutrality. North Korea, from its founding as a communist state, has consistently been placed on the wrong side of this divide.

After the end of the Cold War, while other communist states were able to change their status from enemies to allies of the U.S., North Korea was labeled a rogue state alongside Iraq and Iran in Bush’s 2002 “Axis of Evil” speech. Under the Biden administration’s Cold War 2.0 against China, Pyongyang was part of the “New Axis” together with Russia, China and Iran. As the Pyongyang regime is “evil,” its nuclear program is a “a grave threat to regional and international security” (John Kerry, 2016) and “a direct threat to international peace and security” (Barack Obama, 2010) that America, as the indispensable nation, has the moral duty to deter and eventually neutralize.

By casting the US-DPRK conflict as a struggle between good and evil, democracy and tyranny, the U.S. has tended to reject North Korea’s security concerns as illegitimate or irrational. Most importantly, Pyongyang is not viewed as a strategic equal, as Russia or China might be, but as an aberration—a rogue actor to be sanctioned, deterred, or ignored.

Over-Politicization of the North Korea Threat

The moral lens through which the United States views the DPRK continues to shape U.S. policy, even as the nature of the conflict has shifted significantly, with North Korea no longer just a proliferation concern but an increasingly direct security threat to the U.S. homeland. As a result, despite Pyongyang’s evolving nuclear and missile programs posing a pressing national security challenge, Washington still tends to approach the issue through a political rather than a strategic framework. Siegfried Hecker notes¹⁴

¹⁴ Siegfried S. Hecker and Elliot A. Serbin, *Hinge Points: An Inside Look at North Korea’s Nuclear Program* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

that across the history of U.S.–DPRK nuclear negotiations, key policy decisions driven by political calculations have repeatedly undermined American security objectives and strengthened North Korea’s nuclear capabilities.¹⁵

The United States Negotiations Framework: Denuclearization through Sanctions relief

In this non-proliferation focused moral framing, denuclearization becomes the first step toward redemption — the prerequisite for rejoining the global community. Sanctions function as punishment, lifted only if Pyongyang complies, like a prodigal son returning home. In this narrative, the U.S. assumes the role of judge and North Korea that of the defendant, not an equal partner at the negotiating table. Over time, Washington’s negotiation focus shifted from non-proliferation under the NPT to the threat North Korean nuclear and missile arsenal poses to the national security of the U.S. and its allies. But even as the situation has evolved, that early mindset has stuck, keeping sanctions at the heart of U.S. strategy toward North Korea.

Overreliance on Sanctions

Over the years, sanctions have come to be seen as the ultimate tool for denuclearizing North Korea. But this framing has entrenched them as a rigid barrier to progress rather than a catalyst for change. Decades of overreliance have weakened their coercive power. Like overused antibiotics, sanctions have bred resistance — and strengthened interdependence with like-minded authoritarian regimes, especially China and Russia.¹⁶ As Kim Jong Un recently stated, “The sanctions imposed by the hostile forces on us have taught us a lesson on how to get stronger.”¹⁷

In fact, Washington’s insistence on maintaining sanctions as the centerpiece of its denuclearization strategy has repeatedly undermined diplomatic efforts. As Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, who served

as the finance and economics expert on the UN Panel of Experts from 2015 to 2019, summarized it: “Washington’s troubling approach, in which sanctions are not just one component of a broader policy framework but rather the policy itself. Consequently, the failure of sanctions to achieve their objectives correlates with the failure of the entire approach.”¹⁸

North Korea will Never (never ever) Denuclearize for Sanctions

Pyongyang has made clear that while sanctions relief remains an important short-term objective, the leadership rejects the binary framework imposed by Washington. As Kim Jong Un emphasized soon after the breakdown of talks with the U.S., North Korea would rather adapt to life under sanctions than accept a trade-off of its security for economic relief: “The present situation that warns of a protracted confrontation with the US urgently requires us to make it a fait accompli that we have to live under the sanctions by the hostile forces in the future, too, and to strengthen our internal strength in all aspects... We cannot give up our future security just for visible economic results and happiness and comfort.”¹⁹ In 2025, this position was reiterated with more emphasis: “For what should we turn to ‘denuclearization’? To avoid sanctions? Never. Never ever... There will be no negotiations... with our enemy states to exchange something with them, obsessed with trying to get free from their sanctions.”²⁰

Trump’s Strategic Narrative: American Exceptionalism 1.0 and Inverse Manichaeism

The first Trump administration’s rejection of established U.S. strategic narratives, while disruptive in other contexts, created a unique opportunity to reform U.S. North Korea policy and break the deadlock in US-DPRK relations.

¹⁵ A notable example is the Bush administration’s decision to abandon the 1994 Agreed Framework in response to suspicions about North Korea’s secret highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. That decision, made on political grounds, prompted Pyongyang to extract plutonium from its spent fuel — leading to its first successful nuclear test far sooner than would have been possible through HEU. While producing a bomb through HEU would have taken up to a decade, North Korea was able to develop a plutonium device within six months to a year (Based on the author’s unedited interview with Siegfried Hecker held on August 9, 2022).
¹⁶ Keith A. Preble and Charmaine N. Willis, “Trading with Pariahs: North Korean Sanctions and the Challenge of Weaponized Interdependence,”

Global Studies Quarterly 4, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae031>.

¹⁷ Kim Jong Un, “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un’s Speech at 13th Session of 14th Supreme People’s Assembly of DPRK,” (speech, Pyongyang, September 21, 2025), Organization of Asia-Pacific News Agencies, <https://www.oanews.org/node/705250>.

¹⁸ Joel S. Wit and Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, “Insights from the UN Panel of Experts on North Korea,” *38 North*, May 14, 2024, Harry L. Stimson Center, <https://www.38north.org/2024/05/insights-from-the-un-panel-of-experts-on-north-korea/>.

¹⁹ “Report on 5th Plenary.”

²⁰ Kim Jong Un, “Speech at 13th Session.”

Trump's "America First" foreign policy represents a sharp break from post-World War II liberal internationalism, reanchoring American exceptionalism in Manifest Destiny—what Kupchan defines as "American Exceptionalism 1.0"—rather than the idea of the indispensable nation.²¹

Prioritizing unilateral interests over multilateralism, Trump has systematically reevaluated alliances, challenged trade arrangements, and reduced U.S. commitments abroad. This shift could be seen as a form of disruptive realignment or what might be called inverse Manichaeism: a strategic reversal in which traditional allies are treated with suspicion, while historic adversaries such as Russia and North Korea are approached with unconventional openness. By rejecting the democracy-versus-authoritarianism binary and questioning America's identity as the "indispensable nation," Trump has upended long-standing diplomatic norms. That disruption, though controversial, has created space for novel diplomatic possibilities. For North Korea, this presented a rare opening: a U.S. president willing to discard the traditional playbook in favor of direct, interest-based engagement.

However, simply rejecting existing narratives without establishing a new framework to anchor a different North Korea policy meant that Trump's approach ultimately reverted to the traditional, sanctions-centered negotiating strategy. The diplomatic fallout in Hanoi and Panmunjom showed that while interest-based proposals are important for peacemaking, they won't succeed unless this deeper disconnect between the two sides is addressed.

Framing the Impasse: the Hanoi Fallout

"It was about the sanctions"

Early on, the Trump administration hinted at an innovative, nuanced approach: phased, synchronized steps toward denuclearization using a "multiple baskets" negotiating strategy. This meant tackling security, sanctions, and economic issues in parallel, allowing room for give-and-take. But when talks in Hanoi reached the core issue—denuclearization—Trump walked away from Kim's offer to dismantle Yongbyon in exchange for lifting

post-2016 UN sanctions. As Trump put it, "It was about the sanctions... They were willing to denuke a large portion of the areas that we wanted, but we couldn't give up all of the sanctions for that."²² This shows that even while rejecting the "Libyan model" outright, the U.S. still operates within the same old non-proliferation mindset, using sanctions as the main trade-off for denuclearization.

Kim Jong Un's Calculus

In Kim Jong Un's calculus, the strategic value of North Korea's nuclear program far exceeds the costs of sanctions — it is the leverage through which he envisions a new future for the regime and the country. In this perspective, offering to dismantle Yongbyon in exchange for the majority of UN sanctions was a significant first step—one in which both sides would give up only part of their leverage. Because the destruction of Yongbyon would be irreversible, while sanctions—at least by U.S. allies and proxies—could be easily reimposed, Pyongyang saw the proposal as a leap of faith. Reassured by President Moon, Kim even presented it as a "gift" to Trump, confident it would be well received.²³

Clash of Frameworks and Negotiations Breakdown

What North Korea saw as a generous diplomatic investment was unacceptable to Washington. Trump's team, operating within a framework that treated sanctions as the United States' principal leverage, viewed the proposal not as progress but as an attempt to extract disproportionate concessions. By this logic, Kim's offer looked less like a compromise than an audacious bid to strip away U.S. pressure without meaningful steps towards denuclearization.

As a result, despite Trump's unconventional political strategy and the close personal relationship between the two leaders, negotiations broke down. This was not because of new obstacles but rather the same issues that had persisted for decades. The unprecedented high-level talks laid bare how the entrenched mindsets of their administrations outweighed the leaders' political will, highlighting the structural nature of the issue and the

²¹ Charles Kupchan, "The Clash of Exceptionalisms: A New Fight Over an Old Idea," *Foreign Affairs*, February 13, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/clash-exceptionalisms?check_logged_in=1.

²² "Transcript: President Donald Trump's Press Conference in Vietnam," *POLITICO*, February 28, 2019,

<https://www.politico.com/story/2019/02/28/transcript-trump-press-conference-vietnam-1195529>.

²³ Jacco Zwetsloot, host, *The North Korea News Podcast*, episode 191, "An Interview with Stephen Biegun," July 14, 2021, 2:23:11, <https://www.nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/latest/an-interview-with-stephen-biegun-nknews-podcast-ep-191/902590>.

incompatibility of the psycho-cultural framing between the two countries.

Kim Jong Un's Policy Shift

Since the breakdown of talks in Hanoi and Panmunjom in 2019, the space for renewed U.S.–DPRK engagement has narrowed considerably, as Kim walked away from the U.S.-centered vision of his grandfather that was at the center of Pyongyang's diplomatic engagement with Washington.

A New Strategic Path for North Korea

Ever since the Korean War left the newly independent North Korea heavily reliant on the Soviet Union and China for military and economic support, Kim Il-sung took deliberate steps to ensure the country would not become a vassal or satellite state squeezed between great powers. From its earliest years, North Korean leadership has therefore sought to read global geopolitical shifts for openings that could allow Pyongyang to carve out new international pathways beyond the shadow of its giant neighbors.

In the 1990s, when the Soviet collapse left Pyongyang isolated, Kim Il Sung calculated that recognition from the United States—the post-Cold War superpower and the only capable of balancing overwhelming Chinese influence—was the only viable path forward. Since then, and for decades after Kim Il Sung's death, normalization with Washington became a central pillar of North Korean strategy, carried forward by Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un.

That vision collapsed in Hanoi. There, Kim Jong Un confronted the reality that even under the most favorable conditions, the U.S. and North Korea's goals were fundamentally irreconcilable. The breakdown of diplomacy with Trump meant more to Kim than simply losing a deal—it triggered the abandonment of the strategic vision that had guided North Korean foreign policy for decades: achieving an international breakthrough through normalization with Washington.

As he distanced himself from Washington, Kim Jong Un began pursuing an alternate route to achieve the same long-sought international breakthrough. In 2021, noting that “whoever takes power in the US, its entity and the real intention of its policy toward the DPRK would never change,” Kim called for a shift in foreign policy towards “an adroit strategy toward the US and steadily expand solidarity with the anti-imperialist, independent forces,” already mentioning the intention to strengthen ties with China, Russia, Cuba, and Vietnam.²⁴

As Pyongyang shares Beijing's view of today's geopolitical landscape not as a “Cold War 2.0” but as the inevitable decline of Western dominance and the rise of multipolarity, Kim is leveraging the widening rift among the United States, China, and Russia to rise as a leading actor within the emerging “anti-imperialist, independent” front.

Just as Kim Il Sung leveraged the Yugoslavia–USSR split by reaching out to Tito in the 1970s to position North Korea as a leading voice in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the international isolation of Russia since 2022 has created an opening for Kim Jong Un to exploit Putin's strategic needs and forge a new strategic alliance with Moscow — one that he sees as a stepping stone toward broader international recognition, perhaps even BRICS membership.²⁵

Kim's Shifting Discourse

As Pyongyang's strategic objectives now rest not on normalization with the United States but on an emerging world order that so far imposes no pressure to denuclearize, a normalization-through-denuclearization deal with Washington has lost its relevance. This shift is reflected clearly in the evolution of Kim's discourse on both US-DPRK relations and the nuclear weapons program in his speeches from 2019 to 2025.

In 2019, before the Hanoi Summit, Kim confirmed his commitment to “advance towards complete denuclearization” following the June 12 DPRK-US Joint Statement.²⁶

²⁴ “On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK,” *Korea Central News Agency*, January 9, 2021, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1610155111-665078257/on-report-made-by-supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-at-8th-congress-of-wpk/>.

²⁵ Martin Coles, “[The Tito-Kim Correspondence: Teething Problems, 1975-1976](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/tito-kim-correspondence-teething-problems-1975-1976),” *Sources and Methods*, October 12, 2021, Wilson Center, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/tito-kim-correspondence-teething-](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/tito-kim-correspondence-teething-problems-1975-1976)

[problems-1975-1976](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/tito-kim-correspondence-teething-problems-1975-1976); Rachel Lee, “[Quick Take: North Korea and BRICS](https://www.38north.org/2024/09/quick-take-north-korea-and-brics/),” *38 North*, September 30, 2024, Harry L. Stimson Center, <https://www.38north.org/2024/09/quick-take-north-korea-and-brics/>.

²⁶ Kim Jong Un, “New Year Address of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un for 2019,” (speech, Pyongyang, January 1, 2019), Korea Central News Agency, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1546359920-924727466/new-year-address-of-supreme-leader-kim-jong-un/>.

Later the same year, however, after the Summit, he expressed doubts about a possible misalignment between the two sides: “the second DPRK-US summit talks held in Hanoi last February raised strong questions about whether... the United States is genuinely interested in improving the bilateral relations... the United States still looks away from the withdrawal of its hostile policy... rather it mistakenly believes that if it pressures us to the maximum, it can subdue us.”²⁷

By the end of that year, after the Panmunjom meeting in June and October working level talks in Stockholm failed to resuscitate the process, Kim began rolling back his engagement with Washington. In 2020, he restated the position that a “lasting and durable peace mechanism... in place” must precede any talks on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.²⁸ In 2021, he shifted his position further, declaring the DPRK a nuclear power “in both name and reality,” leaving no room for further negotiation of his nuclear program.²⁹

The End of Normalization through Denuclearization

This shift culminated in September 2025, when Kim Jong Un made clear the new position of the DPRK as irreversible; there will be no talks on denuclearization, as “the concept of ‘denuclearization’ has already lost its meaning. We have become a nuclear state.”³⁰

Kim now is dictating his own conditions for engagement: “if the United States, freeing itself from its absurd pursuit of others’ denuclearization and recognizing the reality, wants genuine peaceful coexistence with us, there is no reason for us not to come face to face with it,” recalling his “good memory” of former President Trump.³¹

Kim’s evolving narrative suggests that what has disappeared is not just the prospect of a deal on U.S. terms—denuclearization for sanctions relief, including

the Yongbyon proposal made in Hanoi, and the formerly innovative three-step incremental denuclearization plan he explicitly dismissed in September 2025. What has vanished is the very North Korean narrative framework that once made such a deal conceivable: normalization through denuclearization. He now believes he occupies a position of strength that allows him to reject any compromise on his demands for normalization without denuclearization.

A Widening Gap

As Kim walks away from Washington, his narrative keeps moving steadily toward an adversarial posture that casts the United States as an enemy and frames military confrontation as both necessary and inevitable. By early 2023, the theme of war preparations began appearing regularly in high-level pronouncements aimed at domestic audiences.³² This escalated further in January 2024, when Kim called for a nationwide collective effort —“*all institutions, enterprises, organizations and citizens in the territory of the Republic*”— toward war readiness, arguing that “*our country’s security environment has steadily deteriorated... and today it has become the world’s most dangerous zone with the risk of war.*”³³ As Kim continues down this trajectory, the prospects for resuming diplomacy, let alone reaching a deal, recede even further.

As Washington continues to adhere to a denuclearization-first policy despite Trump’s unconventional approach, Pyongyang’s castling strategy and increasingly hostile posture has further widened the strategic-narrative gap between the two countries, rendering U.S. re-engagement efforts based on the now outdated frameworks of Singapore and Hanoi unsuccessful.³⁴ Re-engagement will now depend on whether Washington can adapt its approach on North Korea to address the deeper misalignment created by Kim’s strategic shift.

²⁷ Kim Jong Un, “On Socialist Construction and the Internal and External Policies of the Government of the Republic at the Present Stage,” (speech, Pyongyang, April 12, 2019), Korea Central News Agency, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1555240525-453352195/supreme-leader-kim-jong-uns-policy-speech/>.

²⁸ “Report on 5th Plenary.”

²⁹ “8th Congress of WPK.”

³⁰ Kim Jong Un, “Speech at 13th Session.”

³¹ “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un’s Speech at 13th Session of 14th Supreme People’s Assembly of DPRK.” September 21, 2025

³² Robert L. Carlin and Sigfried S. Hecker, “[Is Kim Jong Un Preparing for War?](https://www.38north.org/2024/01/is-kim-jong-un-preparing-for-war/)” *38 North*, January 11, 2024, Harry L. Stimson Center, <https://www.38north.org/2024/01/is-kim-jong-un-preparing-for-war/>.

³³ Kim Jong Un, “On the Immediate Tasks for the Prosperity and Development of Our Republic and the Promotion of the Wellbeing of Our People,” (speech, Pyongyang, January 16, 2024), Korea Central News Agency, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1705369092-194545332/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-makes-policy-speech-at-10th-session-of-14th-spa/>.

³⁴ In chess, castling is a move in which the king is repositioned to a safer square while the rook is brought into play. Metaphorically, it represents a calculated strategic maneuver: a leader moves their core focus to a more secure position while redeploying another key resource to a more active or central role. It often implies calculated caution combined with proactive preparation—not retreating blindly but reorganizing to maintain both security and influence.

Trump 2.0 and the Problem of Re-engagement

Many hoped that Donald Trump's return to the presidency would reverse this course, revive bilateral diplomacy, and open a second opportunity for a breakthrough. The element that most raised hopes for a resumption of diplomacy with Pyongyang was the personal relationship between Trump and Kim, which—unlike Kim's relationship with Moon—appeared to survive the breakdown of talks after the Hanoi summit and is now presented as the key avenue for re-engagement with North Korea: Trump has, on many other occasions, highlighted his “very good relationship” with Kim when asked about prospects for diplomacy with North Korea.³⁵

Trump's personal relationship with Kim could indeed be useful, if applied strategically, to reopen space for reconciliation and gradually restore the possibility of a diplomatic solution; however, Trump should avoid repeating the mistake made in Hanoi—assuming his personal rapport with Kim alone could override fundamental differences in their countries' strategic narratives.

The Limits of the Personal Relationship

The two sides are not ready for a deal. Without bridging the clashing narratives, any future efforts to resolve interest-based differences between Washington and Pyongyang are likely to fail. Should Trump press for a deal prematurely—without a meaningful shift in U.S. policy and in the broader bilateral relationship—it could backfire. Kim himself specifically mentioned that he still has “a good memory of the current US President Trump,” and that he sees “there is no reason for us not to come face to face with (the U.S.),” – however, at the condition that Washington “frees itself from its absurd pursuit of denuclearization.”³⁶

This last sentence captures the core problem: Kim is signaling a willingness to meet, while making clear he rejects re-engaging on the same terms as Singapore and Hanoi. As long as Trump does not declare a fundamental shift in US policy that matches Kim's own move away from the Hanoi framework, or at least articulate a specific meeting purpose that offers Kim a concrete incentive, Kim will continue to avoid

becoming entangled in what he now views as dead-end diplomacy.

A Short-term Approach Can't Unlock Re-engagement

Given the structural nature of this bilateral issue, Trump's signature short-term, transactional style won't secure a lasting resolution. Without a comprehensive agreement that addresses America's core concerns, any deal risks collapsing under the next administration, which would likely revert to traditional U.S. policy and abandon any Trump-era arrangements that diverged from long-standing approaches to North Korea. For the same reason, a short-term approach cannot overcome the deep-seated North Korean distrust that the U.S. will uphold its commitments in the long run, especially with America's four-year democratic cycle that continually shifts policy priorities.

For the U.S. approach to be credible, both to North Korean counterparts and to domestic critics, it must move beyond personal chemistry and confront the structural obstacles shaping negotiations. Trump will have to ensure political and bureaucratic support in Washington, enable Kim to win the trust of the military and party elite in Pyongyang, and account for the concerns of key stakeholders—regional allies, international institutions, and domestic publics.

Reconciliation as a Necessary First Step

In this context, denuclearization talks should be set aside; they are bound to fail in the current environment, and pressing them would close off any chance of easing tensions or bringing Pyongyang back to the table. Instead, prioritizing a process of reconciliation over a deal could provide the space and time needed to develop the right approach and break the current impasse without imposing major concessions or costs on Washington.

As North Korea's growing siege mentality and hostility toward both the United States and South Korea threaten to further destabilize the Peninsula, shifting Kim's adversarial trajectory and reducing the threat posed by Pyongyang's nuclear program should be Trump's first priority—a move that could simultaneously open a pathway to break the diplomatic deadlock.

³⁵ “[President Trump Participates in a Bilateral Meeting with the President of the Republic of Korea](#),” The White House, August 25, 2025, YouTube, 53 min., 37 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/live/mRBy-v6mn08>.

³⁶ “[Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un's Speech at 13th Session of 14th Supreme People's Assembly of DPRK](#),” September 21, 2025

Prioritizing reconciliation should not be seen as a concession to Kim but as a necessary first step to bring North Korea back to the table and into a) a narrative framework that makes a deal possible and b) the opening phase of a sequenced process aimed at stabilizing—and eventually, normalizing—the political and security environment on the Peninsula.

While Trump's personal relationship with Kim cannot serve as a shortcut to a deal, it does offer an opportunity to engage him in a process of reconciliation without preconditions or permanent concessions. Before he can do that, though, Trump will have to confront the U.S. domestic narrative and create political space for an approach centered on reconciliation and sustained dialogue that does not immediately address denuclearization.

Reframing the Narrative to Unlock U.S. Policy on North Korea

North Korea is now a de facto nuclear state, resilient to economic and diplomatic pressure, and its developing international network is undermining Washington's diplomatic leverage by the day.

This leaves Washington with a choice. One option is to keep diplomatic engagement conditional on Pyongyang's commitment to denuclearization, sustain pressure on the regime, and assume that North Korea's current course will eventually collapse, leaving Kim with no alternative but to return to the table on Washington's terms. Yet after 25 years, this strategy has failed to produce that outcome, instead allowing the regime to develop a functional nuclear deterrent.

The other choice is to fundamentally reform its approach and update its strategy so as to "deal with North Korea as it is, not as it wishes it to be," as Former Secretary of Defense William Perry has recommended many times since his review of US North Korea policy in 1999.³⁷ In the present context, however, dealing with North Korea "as it is" will mean engaging Pyongyang diplomatically without – at least in the short term – denuclearization on the table.

Engagement without Denuclearization

Trump has hinted at recognizing Pyongyang's nuclear status and reshaping U.S. policy away from regime change or moral condemnation.³⁸ His unorthodox diplomacy and willingness to break with traditional non-proliferation norms align more closely with Pyongyang's long-standing demand for recognition as a nuclear state. By engaging from this starting point—treating North Korea not as a violator to be punished but as a nuclear peer to be negotiated with—the U.S. could potentially reset the terms of engagement and open a new path for diplomacy that previous administrations have been unwilling to explore.

Nevertheless, shifting away from a decades-old approach centered on non-proliferation and disarmament — on an issue as politicized as North Korea is in the United States — would place President Trump in the near-impossible position of having to craft not only a new policy capable of eliciting a different response from Pyongyang but also a new strategic narrative strong enough to legitimize that policy shift within Washington's political debate. Many will criticize that he is giving Kim what he wants—normalization of relations without denuclearization.

President Trump will need to build a new narrative framework to legitimize engaging diplomatically with North Korea without any commitment on denuclearization.

"North Korea is a nuclear power"

To make progress, US policymakers must start with a difficult truth: North Korea is a nuclear power. Recognizing this status is not an endorsement—it is a necessary starting point, even for eventually achieving denuclearization.

This fact renders the current U.S. approach, still rooted in a nonproliferation framework with sanctions relief as the main leverage, strategically obsolete.³⁹ If Washington continues to approach negotiations as if North Korea can be coaxed back

³⁷ William J. Perry, *Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations* (Office of the North Korea Policy Coordinator – United States Department of State, 1999), <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/PerryReport1999.pdf>.

³⁸ Alannah Hill and Shreyas Reddy, "Trump Calls North Korea a 'Nuclear Power,' Hours After Taking Oath of Office," *NK News*, January 21, 2025,

<https://www.nknews.org/2025/01/trump-calls-north-korea-a-nuclear-power-hours-after-taking-oath-of-office/>.

³⁹ Marialaura De Angelis, "A New Framework for U.S. Nuclear Negotiations with the DPRK," in *The Future of the Korean Peninsula and Beyond: Next-Gen Policy Perspectives* (National Committee on American Foreign Policy, 2022), 132-147, <https://ncafp.org/wp->

into the NPT fold with sanctions and pressure, talks will remain fruitless.

“This has never been done before”

No country has ever been persuaded to voluntarily dismantle a functioning nuclear arsenal. Ukraine gave up Soviet weapons it never controlled. Once a state achieves nuclear capability—as in the case of India, Pakistan, and Israel—convincing it to disarm is extraordinarily difficult. The DPRK does not belong in the same category as Iran or Libya. It belongs with the established nuclear states.

The outdated narrative that recognizing North Korea’s nuclear status would reward bad behavior and encourage others to follow suit has become a key obstacle to the strategic pivot Washington now needs. The situation has, in fact, reversed: if the United States were able to persuade a nuclear-armed state to begin disarming voluntarily, it would accomplish something unprecedented in international relations. No denuclearization agreement has ever succeeded in eliminating an indigenous and functioning nuclear weapons capability; achieving denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula would be without historical precedent.⁴⁰

In fact, the only example of a state voluntarily dismantling an indigenous, functioning nuclear arsenal is South Africa, which did so as a sovereign and strategic choice during a domestic political transition, as apartheid ended and its global isolation eased. In the current circumstances, South Africa’s sovereign choice represents the only viable model for disarmament of an established nuclear power. If Washington hopes to persuade Pyongyang to denuclearize, it must abandon its failing coercive approach and instead focus on creating the conditions under which North Korea can choose to do so—building a “golden bridge” towards denuclearization.⁴¹

From “now or never” to “now, and then”

The narrative shift away from non-proliferation would enable the U.S. to move from a moralistic to a national security approach, framing North Korea’s nuclear program not in terms of its legitimacy but solely through the lens of the threat it poses. Approaching the North Korean issue from a national security perspective shifts the U.S. goal toward managing the threat posed by the DPRK’s nuclear arsenal, rather than pursuing denuclearization per se—thereby helping to depoliticize the issue.⁴²

This shift would free American negotiators from the rigid “now or never” stance on North Korean denuclearization where no agreement is possible without an upfront commitment to complete disarmament—a stance that has so far led to the incremental expansion of North Korea’s nuclear program and increased security risks for Washington and its allies. Instead, the United States could adopt a “now, and then” approach, which prioritizes reducing the immediate threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear arsenal and preventing its further expansion while maintaining its long-term goal of achieving denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Such a reframing opens the door to a restructured negotiation process: instead of pursuing a single, sweeping agreement—a strategy that has failed repeatedly—Washington should adopt an incremental approach built around small, standalone deals, each producing tangible results that can survive leadership transitions and diplomatic stalemates on subsequent deals. This would enable sustained diplomatic engagement, which is an essential element of breaking the US-DPRK deadlock.

Ending the “Chutes and Ladders” Pattern

The vast majority of former negotiators and mediators have long emphasized the need for sustained, long-term engagement with the DPRK before attempting to tackle the most sensitive issues. More recently, former U.S. Special Representative Stephen Biegun reiterated this point, underscoring the importance of establishing liaison offices to

content/uploads/2022/12/The-Future-of-the-Korean-Peninsula-and-Beyond.pdf.

⁴⁰ Ryan Alexander Musto, “The Storied Past of ‘Denuclearization’,” *Sources and Methods*, September 20, 2018, Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-storied-past-denuclearization>.

⁴¹ AJ Harbinger, “[The Art of Negotiation: The Balcony and The Bridge](#),” interview with William Ury, *Art of Charm*, July 23, 2024, 54 min., 32 sec., YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crxKwenWXrw>.

⁴² Marialaura De Angelis, “A New Framework for U.S. Nuclear Negotiations with the DPRK,” National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) EDITED VOLUME: Next-Gen Policy Perspectives: The Korean Peninsula and Beyond,

maintain communication even when formal diplomacy stalls.⁴³

So far, each time the parties failed to reach a denuclearization deal, all interim progress unraveled and all channels of communication eventually shut down, resetting the process entirely. This recurring pattern has produced a “chutes and ladders” dynamic in which, despite more than thirty years of diplomatic exchanges, the level of progress remains essentially where it stood in the early 2000s.

Breaking the process into incremental, separate deals would make each milestone more politically viable and diplomatically resilient, avoiding the trap of the “all or nothing” mindset that has doomed past talks.
Making Sanctions Strategic Again

This “now, and then” incremental approach, supported by a strong “this has never been done before” narrative, also enables a more strategic use of sanctions. Paradoxically, easing sanctions early—paired with robust snapback provisions like the ones employed in the Iran deal—could increase their effectiveness.

Reconnecting North Korea to international markets would create economic dependencies that could later serve as leverage during more sensitive stages of negotiation, particularly around disarmament. Using UN-sanctions relief to reconnect North Korea with the global economy would disrupt its long-standing model of self-reliance and selective interdependence. This model has sustained the regime and its nuclear program through years of isolation and pressure. Establishing new economic ties would render Pyongyang more politically vulnerable to future reimposition of sanctions, even if China and Russia fail to cooperate.

Rather than framing early sanctions relief as appeasement, Trump should present it as part of a longer-term effort to shape North Korea’s incentives. The goal is not to reward Pyongyang, but to rewire the structure of the relationship in a way that gradually renders nuclear weapons less attractive and ultimately a strategic burden—a liability rather than an asset.

Reframing the Narrative to Unlock Diplomatic Re-engagement with Pyongyang

Such a shift in U.S. domestic narratives on the North Korean issue could create the political space for Trump to engage Pyongyang without demanding denuclearization upfront. This would allow him to pursue U.S. objectives by strategically bringing the U.S. framework closer to the DPRK’s own narrative architecture.

Unfortunately, in the current state of affairs, Washington and Pyongyang are not ready to sit down and negotiate any deal. Even without denuclearization on the table, if Trump attempts to negotiate an agreement without first aligning the two sides’ strategic frameworks, he risks either inadvertently giving Kim the upper hand or being forced to walk away—a humiliation for both leaders. Washington must take a step back before it can move forward.

The traditional format of “talks about talks” would not work, as it would still force the parties to confront each other with the aim of reaching a deal while holding mutually hostile and incompatible negotiating visions. What is needed instead is a space for the parties to come together and harmonize their frameworks *before* any deal is even envisioned.

The Vietnam Model

The process of U.S.–Vietnam reconciliation may offer a relevant pathway for unlocking diplomatic progress with Pyongyang.

Although Vietnam—unlike North Korea—did sign peace accords in Paris, relations between Washington and the newly reunified Vietnam were anything but cordial. The trust built through cooperation on war legacy programs has become the basis for progress in other areas of US-Vietnam relations. In the immediate postwar period, former Vietnamese ambassador Lê Văn Bàng recalled that “relations between Vietnam and the United States were so bad we could not talk about anything but MIAs and POWs.”⁴⁴ Over time, however, the POW/MIA and Agent Orange issues “evolved from a subject of anger

⁴³ Jacco Zwetsloot, host, *The North Korea News Podcast*, episode 191, “An Interview with Stephen Biegun,” July 14, 2021, 2:23:11, <https://www.nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/latest/an-interview-with-stephen-biegun-nknews-podcast-ep-191/902590>.

⁴⁴ Andrew Wells-Dang and Carl Stauffer, “Key Components of US-Vietnam Reconciliation,” in *Pathways to Reconciliation: HOW AMERICANS AND VIETNAMESE HAVE TRANSFORMED THEIR RELATIONSHIP* (United States Institute for Peace Press, 2024), 8-20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep64008>.

and resentment to one of appreciation and cooperation.”

The joint field operations that followed became the first substantive cooperative activities between the U.S. and reunified Vietnam. From the late 1980s until formal normalization in 1995, the MIA program laid critical groundwork for broader engagement, eventually expanding into cooperation on landmine removal and assistance to war victims — steps that proved instrumental in enabling full normalization of relations. Crucially, the prominence of the POW/MIA issue in U.S. domestic politics provided the legitimacy necessary for reconciling with a former adversary. It created political space for U.S. leaders to pursue normalization with a country still widely perceived as an enemy.

CBMs as Stand-alone Deals to Reform Bilateral Relations

MIA recovery has already been used as one of several confidence-building measures (CBMs) during U.S.–DPRK talks under the first Trump administration.⁴⁵ As in previous rounds of diplomacy, however, once negotiations hit the denuclearization wall in Hanoi, cooperation on MIA recovery and all CBM-driven progress quickly unraveled, leaving bilateral relations back where they stand today.

Instead of treating it as a confidence-building measure attached to a larger deal, Trump could jump-start re-engagement with Pyongyang by focusing solely on MIA recovery—an issue of direct relevance to the U.S. public that can generate domestic support for bilateral talks while remaining non-sensitive enough for both sides to cooperate and begin rebuilding trust. From there, the approach could gradually expand to other similarly structured cooperation frameworks—such as joint demining of the DMZ or collaboration on climate-disaster response and nuclear safety—postponing more sensitive discussions until on-the-ground cooperation has created a more solid foundation.

By doing this, the United States and North Korea could begin following the same step-by-step path Washington once pursued with Vietnam, gradually expanding cooperation until formal normalization—and a deal—becomes politically viable. Unlike “talks

about talks,” concrete on-the-ground cooperation would itself require opening liaison offices, as recommended by Steve Biegun, and would necessitate steps to de-escalate tensions on the Peninsula — potentially beginning with a resumption of the 2018 moratorium on DPRK missile development and a suspension of joint military exercises specifically targeting the Kim regime.

Strategic Ambiguity on the Nuclear Issue

For the above approach to work, denuclearization talks must be set aside. That does not have to mean abandoning the goal entirely.

Trump’s subversive political narrative and personal approach with Kim, supported by a calculated shift in U.S. domestic narratives, could allow Washington to strategically postpone denuclearization, creating the conditions for a viable resolution of the North Korea issue. By neither pressing the matter nor declaring that the U.S. has abandoned it, Trump could keep the issue open until conditions become favorable, potentially much later in the process, even under a different administration. In doing so, Trump would not be remembered as the leader who abandoned denuclearization; rather, he would be remembered as the one who turned the page on one of the most intractable challenges in American political history.

Denuclearization “South Africa style” as Long-term Goal

Now that Kim has moved away from the “normalization through denuclearization” framework, North Korean denuclearization can only be possible as a sovereign choice, part of building a new strategic narrative for the country—one designed to turn the page and replace an identity rooted in wartime legacy and defiance with a forward-looking vision for the country’s place in the world, much like South Africa.

Of course, there is a significant possibility that North Korea will not denuclearize, even if relations with Washington improve. For Pyongyang, normalization with Washington has long been seen as a path to genuine strategic autonomy, particularly from China.⁴⁶ The United States is not North Korea’s only

⁴⁵ [Maegan Vasquez, “Trump and Kim agree to recovery of US military remains from Korean War,” Cable News Network, June 12, 2018.](https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/12/politics/korean-war-pow-mia-agreement-donald-trump-kim-jong-un)

⁴⁶ For instance, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il told South Korean President Kim Dae-jung in 2000 that once a peace treaty was signed, he had no issues with a US military presence in Korea, as long as it was not aimed at the DPRK. (See “[Examining the Lessons of the 1994 US-North Korea](#)”

perceived threat, and Pyongyang will not want to trade its current reliance on Beijing and Moscow for a future dependence on Washington's nuclear umbrella.

While envisioning a rising multipolar world in which extended nuclear deterrence is losing effectiveness as a security guarantee, Pyongyang is unlikely to relinquish its nuclear deterrent or the status it confers unless a fundamental geopolitical shift in the region and the broader nuclear order makes doing so strategically rational—without compromising its long-sought independence.

However if relations improve, the security environment on the peninsula and in the region will stabilize, and if North Korea's international status evolves, the Kim regime may eventually find itself in a position to make a strategic choice analogous to the one F.W. de Klerk made for South Africa in 1989—entering a voluntary process of nuclear rollback because the broader political circumstances finally make such a decision not only possible, but strategic. By that point, improved relations—and the reconciliation process successfully halting further development—would have made Kim's nuclear arsenal far less of a threat to U.S. and regional security. What Kim would receive in exchange for such a gesture once both the country's image and the framing of the gesture have shifted would likely be far less costly for Washington and far more valuable for Pyongyang than any deal possible today.

Conclusion: Building a “Golden Bridge” for both sides

The persistent failure of U.S.–DPRK negotiations stems from more than diverging interests or sequencing disputes. At its core lies a clash of deeply embedded strategic narratives, with each side viewing the conflict—and the very purpose of diplomacy—as fundamentally incompatible with the other.

[Deal](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/themes/lessons.html),” *Frontline*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/themes/lessons.html>.
l.) For Pyongyang, the presence of U.S. troops could, at that point, serve the regime as protection against Chinese influence. Again in 2018, when bilateral relations were at their lowest, Pyongyang described China as the DPRK's “thousand-year enemy” and expressed willingness to accept a long-term US presence on the Korean Peninsula to counterbalance China's influence. (See Ben Frohman, Emma Rafaelof, and Alexis Dale-Huang, [The China-North Korea Strategic Rift: Background and Implications for the United States](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/China-North_Korea_Strategic_Rift_Background_and_Implications_for_the_United_States) (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2022), https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/China-North_Korea_Strategic_Rift.pdf.)

If Trump seeks to change the trajectory of U.S.–DPRK relations while Kim is disengaging, he will need to unilaterally construct a “golden bridge” for both Kim and himself. As William Ury explained, building a golden bridge means enabling the other party to change its trajectory—not through surrender or retreat but by offering a path that allows it to step forward on its own terms.⁴⁷ Only by crafting a new narrative that lets both Washington and Pyongyang cross with dignity can a durable solution emerge. This narrative bridge—one that breaks the cycle of repeating a failed model—offers the best chance to overcome the deadlock and chart a new course.

If Trump can acknowledge the existing disconnect and work to build a new negotiation framework collaboratively while cooperating on less sensitive issues, mirroring the approach of U.S.–Vietnam reconciliation, resolving this intractable historical conflict may prove far simpler and less costly than either side currently imagines without requiring dramatic breakthroughs or unprecedented concessions.

As Nelson Mandela once said, “It always seems impossible until it's done.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ AJ Harbinger, “[The Art of Negotiation: The Balcony and The Bridge](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crxKwenWXrw),” interview with William Ury, *Art of Charm*, July 23, 2024, 54 min., 32 sec., YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crxKwenWXrw>.

⁴⁸ While this famous quote—highlighting that daunting challenges become achievable through perseverance—is commonly attributed to Nelson Mandela, historical analysis suggests that similar sentiments appeared much earlier, including in the works of the Roman author Pliny the Elder; it was, however, widely popularized through Mandela's association with the struggle against apartheid.

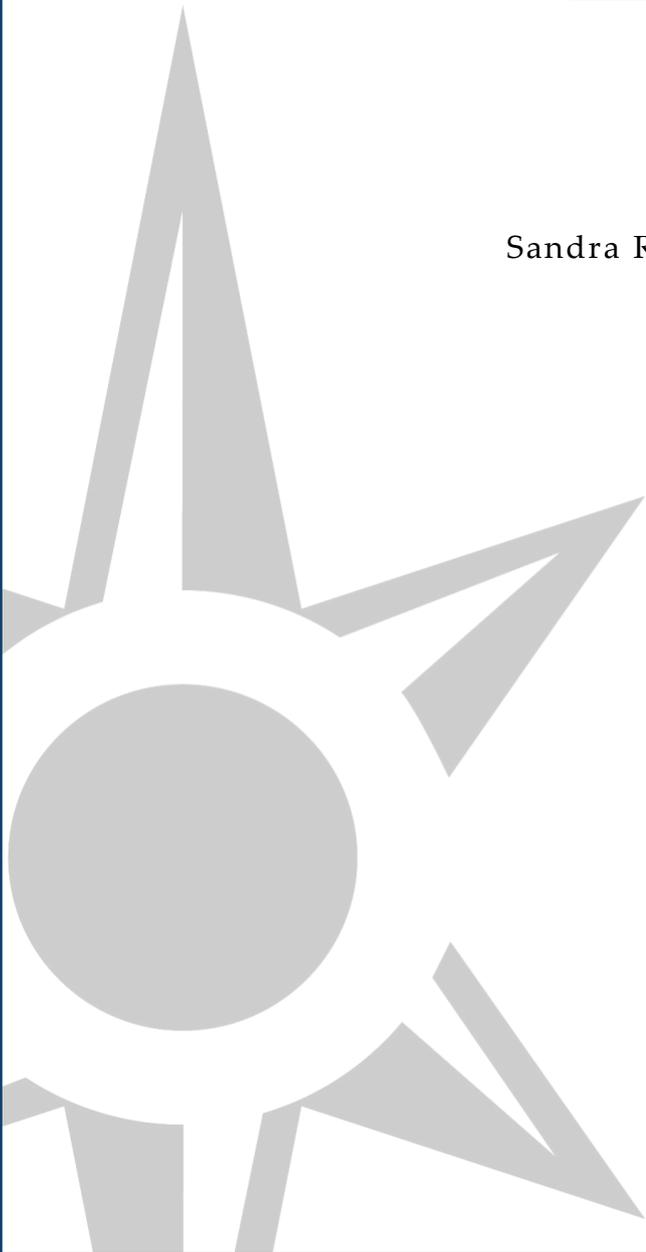
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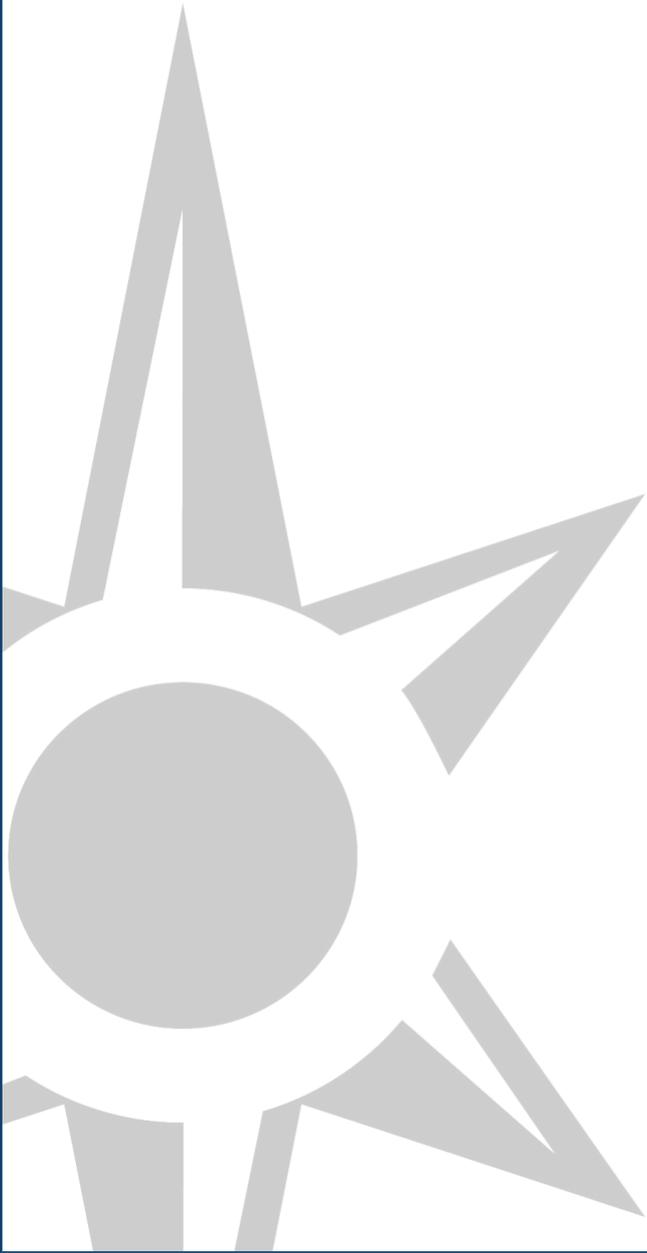
MARIALAURA DE ANGELIS is a James A. Kelly Fellow at Pacific Forum in Hawai'i and an affiliated researcher at the East-West Center. She also serves as Senior Advisor at Track2Asia, a Brussels-based NGO specializing in Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogue between Europe and East Asia. A passionate advocate for peaceful conflict resolution, Marialaura has been actively involved in mediation efforts on the Korean Peninsula since 2008.



Commanding the Future: Economic Statecraft in the National Framework for the Defense Production Act

By
Sandra Roshonda Thomas





Executive Summary

Sandra Roshonda Thomas

The United States faces a huge gap between its strategic national DIME objectives and the capacity of its defense industrial base (DIB) to sustain a large-scale conflict with the People’s Republic of China. Globally, the supply chains would falter and the economies around the world would cripple within days. While the U.S. military will strive to maintain operational and tactical advantages, these strengths are increasingly undermined by structural weaknesses in industrial resilience, supply chain agility, and economic statecraft. This paper argues that **the Defense Production Act (DPA), situated within the broader framework of national power—diplomacy, information, military, and economic (DIME)—must be reconceptualized as an instrument of deterrence, time now, rather than a reactive mechanism of crisis response that would prove to be too late.**

The DPA demonstrated repeatedly a way to nationalize mobilization, from World War II’s industrial conversion to the Cold War stockpiling. The modern-day example of the DPA in action was the medical production assistance during COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite its statutory breadth, the DPA remains underutilized and poorly integrated across federal agencies. Inconsistent strategic direction and limited communication among federal agencies and governmental authorities have left the United States and global partners vulnerable to supply chain disruptions, adversarial dependencies, and insufficient surge capacity. These vulnerabilities are particularly acute in critical minerals, munitions production, transportation networks, and dual-use industrial sectors.

Two central conclusions from the paper are that **the warfighter’s ability to prevail in a protracted conflict is inseparable from the nation’s ability to mobilize, sustain, and protect its industrial base.** The second is that the persistent gaps in information flow between strategic and tactical echelons, insufficient integration with allied industrial partners, and a lack of coherent mechanisms for prioritizing defense requirements during crisis.

To address these deficiencies, the United States must adopt a whole-of-nation approach that positions the industrial base as a means of importance, leveraging partnerships and relationships to ensure security of the nation with sufficient supplies. This requires not only modernizing the DPA’s implementation but also embedding industrial preparedness into national security planning, allied coordination, and economic policy.

A few key considerations and recommended solutions are: 1) **Reframe the DPA as a central pillar of economic deterrence**, with pre-authorized activation pathways tied to indicators of strategic competition and emerging crises. 2) **Establish a Joint Industrial Mobilization Board** to coordinate federal agencies, industry, and allied partners; conduct industrial-base wargames; and publish regular readiness assessments. 3) **Expand allied industrial integration** through co-production agreements, shared stockpiles, interoperable systems, and harmonized acquisition strategies across AUKUS, Japan, and other partners. 4) **Institutionalize public-private wargaming** focused on supply chain resilience, transportation vulnerabilities, and critical infrastructure protection.

The United States cannot rely on a tactical advantage alone to win a protracted war with a near-peer adversary. In an era of great-power competition, the ability to deter and, if necessary, sustain a protracted conflict will depend on the nation’s capacity to mobilize its industrial base with urgency and accuracy.

Introduction

In the event of a large-scale conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the current U.S. defense industrial base will be insufficient to sustain military warfighter demands. The paper will discuss the historical formation and evolution of the Defense Production Act as a foundation for modern economic statecraft, analyze how its mechanisms- within the broader national framework of diplomacy, information, military and economic (DIME) power- must be expanded and integrated to ensure national resilience and strategic superiority for the warfighter to be successful.

What does the warfighter need from the defense industrial base in the event of a large-scale conflict with the PRC? There are essential commodities that armed forces will need to defend the United States in a kinetic or non-kinetic homeland battle. The commodity needs will be different for the warfighter than for the commercial sector, and this must be addressed. In addition to commodity needs within the United States, there will be essential needs overseas. The same supply chain that supports the United States supports the overseas commodities. When a conflict starts, days' worth of stored supplies will diminish, any stockpiles of supply chain materials will run low, and supply chain movement of commodities will be halted.

The concepts above are not novel, but the policies and procedures to secure supply chains and resolve potential military and commercial commodities and material shortages are not being addressed by the appropriate stakeholders. The proper leaders in the defense industrial base (DIB) and the organic industrial base (OIB) are not taking the lead. The arguments that need to bring the necessary changes to secure a system of robust supplies to take care of both the military and civilian sector aren't making the news. There are still leaders in the military that think that food, water, and healthcare supplies will magically appear on the battlefield because they ordered it from a system. There are other literary works focusing on a protracted conflict with China, but they fail to consider the logistics in economic statecraft or root their arguments in operational and tactical reasoning.

In an era of multi-domain conflict and strategic competition, the warfighter's edge is no longer defined solely by weapons systems or tactical

superiority. It is increasingly shaped by the resilience of the industrial base, the agility of supply chains, and the foresight of economic policy. Yet, despite growing awareness of these dependencies, the DIB continues to treat economic statecraft as a peripheral concern, creating a blind spot to kinetic planning and operational design that will continue to be detrimental if not corrected.

This blind spot is not merely hypothetical. It manifests in delayed procurement cycles, brittle logistics networks, fractured supply to supplier transactions, and an overreliance and dependency on adversarial sources for critical materials. No matter where in the world a warfighter may be deployed, they are ultimately constrained by their nation's ability to sustain any sort of prolonged supply redundancy for both commercial and military needs. Economic statecraft, therefore, must be reimagined not as a bureaucratic lever, but as a frontline capability—one that shapes deterrence, enables readiness, and signals resolve.

There is military emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, but what about the other parts of the globe that will suffer from loss of access to certain commodities as a result? As previously implied, the rest of the world will not stop simply because supply chains will become non-existent in the face of kinetic or non-kinetic attacks on the United States. Have the DIB and tiered vendors planned for these contingencies and recorded their findings? If so, are their findings public and unclassified so that other groups can read and comprehend what could or must happen for preparation? Have foreign industrial partners met with US defense companies and discussed scenarios of supply chain stopgaps or loss of critical nodes and infrastructure? A negative answer to any of the above questions could be detrimental to the warfighter, the near peer war effort, and the supply ecosystem, but this is not the first time in history that these questions have come up.

The historical formation and evolution of the Defense Production Act

The origination of all Defense Production Acts legislation is from The Defense Production Act of 1950 (DPA). It is said that the models for the DPA were the First and Second War Powers Acts of 1941 and 1942, which gave the executive branch broad authority to regulate industry during World War II. The two War Powers Acts included provisions for the

President regulating contracts and making payments. The Second War Powers Act was quite extensive. The powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission expanded to allow the transportation of war materials. The Secretaries of the War and Navy were enabled to place orders and contracts. The Presidents authorities extended so that he could place priorities on contracts and exports. The DPA, as amended, provides the president a broad set of [authorities to ensure that domestic industry](#)¹ can meet national defense requirements. In the DPA, Congress has found that the security of the United States is dependent on the ability of the domestic industrial base to supply materials and services for national defense² and to prepare for and respond to military conflicts, [natural or man-caused disasters](#), or acts of terrorism within the United States. This is important to economic stability because if the military cannot defend the United States, the homeland, in response to any threat, there would be no will of the people. If the people of the United States have no hope of avoiding or mitigating destruction and chaos, they subsequently would not go to work or continue to thrive. There would be no stability to maintain.

During the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration used the provisions of the DPA to continue preparing the United States for a global war with communism³ by increasing the size of the national stockpile, funding exploration for metals and minerals, and [supporting the dispersion of the development of industry](#) companies across the United States. From the 1960s, the levers transformed with each successive president. An example of the levers expanding was in 1970, when it was decided that the president can prioritize contracts for goods and services and authorize incentives for certain commodities within domestic supply chains when deemed necessary for national security. The majority of the DPA authorities are listed in Sec 791 of P.L 115-232, and the current reauthorizations are set to expire in January of 2026. This is the second extension that has been granted. The first was in September of 2025. It is highly probable, that the extension will push into the Spring of 2026 to continue to assist in the domestic production of goods.

Section 101 of DPA Title I states that the *priority* performance authority allows the federal government to ensure the timely availability of critical materials, equipment, and services produced in the private market in the interest of national defense, and to receive those materials, equipment, and services through contracts before any other competing interest.⁴ The DPA was designed to ensure that the United States could rapidly mobilize its industrial base in response to national emergencies. It empowered the executive branch to prioritize contracts, allocate resources, and incentivize production across sectors deemed vital to national defense. Since taking office once more, President Trump has issued executive orders mandating offices within the Pentagon to look deeply into critical minerals, mining in the United States and more. Specifically for critical minerals, there are task forces exploring ways to leverage industrial engagement and the necessary services to ensure that the warfighter has what they need.

Logistics during the decades in Iraq were at the point of need. The warfighter could order supplies in a system and then the manufacturer could support the warfighter through agencies such as LOGCAP or the Defense Logistics Agency and get the supplies to the warfighter in a relatively short time frame. With the near peer adversary, the warfighter is looking at longer lead times with the war potential in the Indo-pacific. If the warfighter is depending on logistics at the point of need, it will be too late. Industry will have to service items to the warfighter in a predictive manner specifically for global positioning and in the Indo-Pacific landscape. Though critical minerals may seem like they are just the start of the process, they are interwoven at every step of the supply chain process, and the executive branch understands that. The mining process is just as integral as the refining process of key rare earths minerals. This explains the recent changes and the monetary grants recently awarded to the Department of Energy and other private sector defense companies. This will be a whole of nation approach.

During World War II, the First and Second War Powers Acts enabled a historic transformation of the American economy. Civilian factories pivoted to

¹ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The Defense Production Act of 1950: History, Authorities, and Considerations for Congress*, by Alexandra G. Neenan, R43767 (2023), footnote 6, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R43767>.

² U.S. Library of Congress, *History, Authorities, and Considerations*, footnote 7.

³ Tim Rives, Kim Barbieri, Marlon Guinn et al., *Advise the President: Dwight D. Eisenhower — How Should the United States Confront Soviet Communist Expansionism?* (National Archives and Records Administration), <https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/advise-the-president/eisenhower-projectsolarium.pdf>

⁴ U.S. Library of Congress, *History, Authorities, and Considerations*, 5.

military production with unprecedented speed. Automakers built tanks and aircraft, textile mills produced uniforms and parachutes, and the federal government orchestrated a symphony of supply that overwhelmed Axis powers. This was not merely industrial might—it was strategic choreography, executed with clarity and conviction.

In the decades that followed, the DPA was created and invoked to support Cold War stockpiling, accelerate post-9/11 body armor production, and, more recently, facilitate COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing. Each invocation reflected a moment of national urgency—a reactive posture to crisis rather than a proactive strategy for deterrence.

The warfighter will be one customer to the DIB should a protracted war begin, along with all the domestic partners that the industrial base will have to service. Granted, the word “defense” in “defense industrial base” implies that those industrial partners will prioritize defending the nation, but will it take congressional mandates to make this happen? Industrial partners will have different requirements, but who will get what, and who determines the orders process when a conflict does arise?

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, not only were there competing requirements that were commercially scarce, meaning companies outside the DIB [struggled to acquire basic needs](#)⁵, but the scarcity compounded, confusing, choking and killing the supply chains in the United States and globally. Basic essential items could not go from point of origin to point of need. The fight for essential household goods, from toilet paper⁶ even to automobiles, was messy. The United States is still suffering from COVID-19 and the aftermath in 2025. There are still not enough stockpiled products⁷ for the healthcare systems resilience in the United States because they are manufactured in China.⁸ The vaccine for COVID-19 is still under developed if there were another outbreak and millions needed to be vaccinated. The DIB is not postured to handle another healthcare crisis let alone an invasion of near peer adversary.

⁵ Julianna Kaplan and Grace Kay, “Can’t find chicken wings, diapers, or a new car? Here’s a list of all the shortages hitting the reopening economy,” *Business Insider*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-supply-shortages-economy-inventory-chips-lumber-cars-toilet-paper-2021-5>.

⁶ Kaplan and Kay, “Can’t find chicken wings.”

⁷ EJ Emanuel, G Persad, R Upshur, B Thome, M Parker, A Glickman, C Zhang, A Boyle, M Smith, JP Phillips, “Fair Allocation of Scarce Medical

Through instruments of national power defined as diplomacy, information, military and economics, the warfighter is grossly unprepared to fight against a near peer adversary due to a weak industrial base. As such, should the President invoke the DPA now or perhaps, in conjunction with the current executive orders on critical mineral acquisitions, employ leverage another way to accelerate the contract process for industrial partners through multi-year procurements and route funding through transactional authorities beyond the Federal Acquisitions Regulation? The DPA remains robust in statute but anemic in practice. DPA as a whole is underutilized, with its authorities fragmented across agencies and its strategic potential largely untapped due to the lack of a true knowledge base and understanding of what the titles can leverage. In this era of great power competition, this latency is a liability for the American people in a potential time of crisis. The DPA must be reimagined not as a tool of last resort, but as a cornerstone of economic deterrence—a mechanism for shaping adversary behavior, signaling industrial resolve, and ensuring warfighter readiness. The DPA needs to reach its full potential in the United States.

Military: The Scope of the Fight with China

In a [Vision Times News](#)⁹ article from April of 2025, Admiral Paparo, the 27th combatant commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), argues that the United States needs to have a stance in the upcoming conflict with Taiwan and states that the conflict is indeed coming. He also mentions in multiple articles that he pulls algorithm updates from artificial intelligence (AI) and does scenario testing on the US entering or not entering the war with China. The number of scenarios predicting the former is in the millions. Now, some may argue that the AI system Admiral Paparo used could have had hallucinations in their facts or influenced algorithms that could have infiltrated the data (i.e. Chinese intelligence changing the data or some form of bias hidden in the algorithm), but there are other wargames that support the assessment of predicted casualties in the

Resources in the Time of Covid-19.”

<https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMsb2005114>.

⁸ Maryn McKenna. Amid Coronavirus fears, a mask shortage could spread globally. 2020. <https://www.wired.com/story/amid-coronavirus-fears-a-mask-shortage-could-spread-globally/>

⁹ “War Over Taiwan Would Cause 500,000 Deaths, Economic Devastation, US Admiral Paparo Says,” *Vision Times*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.visiontimes.com/2025/04/18/war-over-taiwan-would-cause-500000-deaths-economic-devastation-us-admiral-paparo-says.html>.

millions. Of note, the panels at the Solarium event at the National Defense University in March of 2025, where I was the lead action officer. One of the presentations by the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) expressed a staggering number of US military commodities, personnel and equipment lost in first 30 days of a potential [protracted war scenario with Taiwan](#)¹⁰ on page 119 of the wargame report. Dr. Cancian and the team ran over 30 simulations of their wargame and came to the same conclusions over and over again in a controlled test. Another case study supporting a massive death toll was completed by the RAND corporation in 2016, referring to [heavy losses](#)¹¹ in multiple paragraphs throughout the report. Whether the data is arguably influenced by the adversary or not, the US does not have the advantage in the loss of human life. Because the United States populace endured so much loss in WWII, the public sentiment will not view losses well. Advancing political agendas will only go so far to shape or influence behaviors if the American people are grieving the loss of citizens and their military. World War II [had the most U.S. deaths](#)¹² in all the US wars combined and a plan for the burial of mass returns of human remains has not [been in effect since around 1951](#)¹³. With the numbers reported in an AI algorithm in a potential conflict with Taiwan, a plan for the return of casualties needs to be discussed among DIB partners and the Department of War alongside the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of State.

The GDP is affected by multiple levers. It is not only based on Congressional budgetary appropriations, but the will of the American people to put money into the economy. Not to go on a financial tirade, but without currency in circulation or jobs being created or maintained because of a war, there will be a stagnant or lower GDP. A lower GDP will hurt the US economy. Most of the world ranks a country's ability to function by its overall GDP. The United States' GDP has always fallen behind compared to

China's, but our two systems are set up differently as well. The CCP is based on a GDP where the political system is communist in nature, where all political figures are tied to its [monetary hierarchy](#).¹⁴ The United States, on the other hand, is democratic in nature, and there is a balanced system of accountable authorities, like the Federal Acquisition Regulation.

Militarily, the warfighter must continue to be supported by the Defense Industrial Base before a near peer adversarial fight. Admiral Paparo briefed the House Services Committee in April 2025 as well that his assessment was that half a million lives perish entering the war according to the algorithms, and a war would shatter global economies, according to [US Naval Institute News](#).¹⁵ This is the second reference that a senior leader gave in regards to casualties in a near peer conflict. How can the warfighter have what they need from the DIB in the United States? One important commodity would be transportation, requiring a tying in of both military and commercial means because transportation is vulnerable to disruption by the adversary. Without preparing both beforehand and utilizing them both in a conflict, the warfighter and the economy would be in turmoil. To prepare, the U.S. must treat its industrial base as a strategic weapon system. This includes convening wargames that integrate Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), Surface Deployment and Distribution Command (SDDC), commercial logistics firms, and fuel providers. It means mapping transportation assets, identifying surge capacity, and establishing protocols for prioritization under crisis conditions. The warfighter cannot afford to compete with domestic demand during wartime; the industrial base must be primed to serve defense first. One game could include the Air Force and its aircraft within the U.S. and then adding commercial airlines such as Spirit or, Alaska with an overlay of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The wargame would be a layered event in steps of moving pieces on a board as a tabletop exercise and then graduating to movement on ground for an

¹⁰ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The first battle of the next war: wargaming a Chinese invasion of Taiwan* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>

¹¹ David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking through the Unthinkable* (RAND, 2016), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1140.html

¹² "119 US Military War Deaths Statistics (Death Toll by Branch, War, & President)," *The Hive Law*, <https://www.thehivelaw.com/blog/us-military-death-toll-by-branch-war-president/>.

¹³ Paul Wiseman, "New Study Looks at a Grim Mission: Bringing WWII's Dead Back Home," *HistoryNet*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.historynet.com/new-study-grim-mission/>.

¹⁴Tai Ming Cheung and Thomas Mahnken, *The Decisive Decade: United States-China Competition in Defense Innovation and Defense Industrial Policy in and beyond the 2020s* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2023),

[https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8352_\(Decisive_Decade_Report\)_FINAL_web.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8352_(Decisive_Decade_Report)_FINAL_web.pdf).

¹⁵ John Grady, "INDOPACOM CO Paparo Outlines Risk of Western Pacific Conflict," *USNI News*, April 10, 2025, <https://news.usni.org/2025/04/10/indopacom-co-paparo-outlines-risk-of-western-pacific-conflict>.

exercise. That said, the one missing piece in both scopes would be the fuel industry. Inviting those partners to the discussion would diversify the type of fuel needed for both ground equipment and air operations. Having the necessary expertise in the game could determine how much fuel would be needed in a real-world operation, not just for the exercise. The other stakeholders in the game would be those that could locate the resources needed on a map. A few questions to consider would be the following: is the data shareable with industry partners, and is it readily available at the right level of classification that is releasable to the public on network servers? Military and industry stakeholders would have work to do to deconflict any respective assets requiring certain prioritization depending on the severity of circumstances. This is just one example with one commodity; there are many others besides transportation that need to be discussed and leveraged by the defense industry, private sector industry and the Department of War.

Diplomacy: Building Industrial Alliances Beyond the Battlefield

CSIS has an initiative with Japan and the Air Force depots involving American aircrafts and Japanese industry companies partnering and supplying repair components. I have attended two forum meetings in the past two years. Japanese industrial companies are being trusted to work on the C-130's programs alongside the warfighter, with certain spare parts bringing interoperability at the point of need. The Regional Sustainment Framework is one of the initiatives that the Office of the Assistant Secretary of War for Product Support uses in their portfolio to assess global maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) initiatives connecting the military services needs to industry. The Regional Sustainment Framework team has been working with the center on these MRO initiatives.

Another initiative that is parallel to the Regional Sustainment Framework and they are working together is the Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience out of the Office of Indo-Pacific Security Affairs. The warfighters' success will come from being able to have the most equipment on the

battlefield and the spare parts to fix the equipment at the point of need. There is not enough emphasis on allies and partners' relationships, and the United States government is not being aggressive enough about it other than the two initiatives mentioned. Where can the spare parts be stockpiled? The two groups mentioned above are working tirelessly [to connect parts and pieces](#)¹⁶ for the warfighter and industry on these fronts.

This is one step in diplomacy for the United States government exercising the DIB ahead of a protracted conflict, but it is just two initiatives, with two groups. In addition, it is the AUKUS program attempting to grow. There is an urgent need for more programs, more awareness for interoperability for systems- especially weaponry- and the work needs to expand. For example, the trilateral AUKUS agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States must evolve into a broader industrial coalition. This means co-producing systems, sharing spare parts, and aligning acquisition strategies. Interoperability must be more than a buzzword—it must be embedded in design, logistics, and sustainment. The Regional Sustainment Framework and PIPIR initiative must continue to expand throughout multiple industrial partnership globally to have the co-sustainment reach to the defense industrial base.

I am hopeful with [the new executive order](#)¹⁷ issued by President Trump in early April 2025 that some of the foreign military sales programs will push forward some of the industrial partners contracts with U.S. allies and partners and that some of the equipment that is scheduled to be delivered can spur on conversations about production capacity, interoperability advancement, and technology innovation. All diplomatic efforts will be helpful in deconflicting any supply chain stopgaps that would be inevitable without U.S. defense industrial bases involving allied industrial bases in conversations.

Information: Bridging the Tactical-Strategic Divide

National Defense Associations hold conferences that invite industrial partners and military service members to discuss relevant topics throughout the

¹⁶ Jed Royal, "Remarks by Principal Deputy Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Jed Royal at the 2024 Mt. Fuji Dialogue," (speech, Tokyo, November 19, 2024), U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, [https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-](https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3972197/remarks-by-principal-deputy-secretary-of-defense-for-indo-pacific-security-afia/)

[View/Article/3972197/remarks-by-principal-deputy-secretary-of-defense-for-indo-pacific-security-afia/](https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3972197/remarks-by-principal-deputy-secretary-of-defense-for-indo-pacific-security-afia/).

¹⁷ Exec. Order No. 14268, 90 Fed. Reg. 15631 (April 9, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/reforming-foreign-defense-sales-to-improve-speed-and-accountability/>.

year. In March 2025, I attended the Munitions Executive Summit. A few panels had retired colonels and generals from the Army and the Air Force engaged in multiple panels throughout the summit. On each of the panels, the National Defense Strategy was mentioned. Not once did they mention the requirements that the military services had provided in the first ever [national defense industrial base strategy published in 2024](#).¹⁸ Since publication, it has been taken offline, and an analyst has published an overview of the insights¹⁹. The National Defense Industrial Base Strategy contains service requirements that were specific to munitions and munitions production. It was apparent that information for strategic documents may not rotate to the leadership levels that need them.

The disconnect between sharing information among leadership at the strategic and tactical levels in the military is what I have surmised to be one of the gaping holes in military leadership that will be detrimental to the warfighter. There is not enough connection between the echelons. Because of those gaps, industry is not able to get the demand signals that they need to gain the proper insights to make the necessary decisions on resource allocations. With this being a problem on the military circles, I can only imagine what concerns there are commercially connecting industry to the economy. A group of authors in an article commissioned by Michael Bloomberg, it is believed that in the past 80 years, the U.S. has deterred global conflict by maintaining a military with a decisive [advantage over its competitors](#)²⁰. The article denotes that a shift in DOD resources to innovative programs and private capital will be a way to achieve a competitive edge going into the future. Going forward, private-public partnerships — commercial and government agencies cross-collaborating need to be the norm instead of the abnormalities that exist today.

Through military transitions, senior leaders will miss the intent of other senior leaders and industry if conversations are not started in the same room immediately. One senior leader in the Navy will miss the intent of what the Army's senior leader was explaining about a piece of equipment with industry in the room that will cause the United States

government to stumble in getting the warfighter what they need for a protracted war. A conversation that will be missed for vital information to make decisions on [acquisition purchases because of a fear of impropriety](#)²¹ far left of a request for a proposal (RFP) is a dire need right now and it is what is stopping the warfighter from getting the right technology in a timely manner. In economic statecraft, dual-use leverage blurs civilian and defense economies in reference to the DPA. Although defense and civilian agencies should have separate uses for these types of occasions, there may be a need in the future for the U.S. to be a leader in having dual use for clean energy, biodefense technology, critical mineral production and other areas where such usage will shape global influence. The hinderance can't be because senior military officials will not meet with industry to discuss warfighter needs.

The warfighter needs the most up-to-date technology to defeat the PRC's swarm drone attacks. The [latest drone technology](#) developed by Anduril, and other innovation defense companies competing for contracts are just one piece to the warfighter having what they need before they know they need it—this is predictive logistics. Without emphasis on information sharing among industry and the military, the warfighter will not have what they need for a protracted conflict, let alone what they need to sustain themselves in the duration of the conflict in the United States and abroad. Companies such as Cachai —whose founder and CEO, Emma Bates, has a high opinion on what the defense industry should be doing when it comes to drone swarming to defeat a near peer attack,— should be taken into consideration when it comes to acquisition procurement. The future in technology isn't just a drone; it would be a prototype that would give the warfighter a chance to design a drone how they would like to move in space and time. As Bloomberg's article put it, "One thing is certain: time and resources are in [short supply](#)."

Economics: Mobilizing the Industrial Arsenal

At AUSA in October of 2025, a C-UAS panel convened with senior army officials and defense

¹⁸ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The 2024 National Defense Industrial Strategy: Issues for Congress*, by Luke A. Nicastro, IN12310 (2024), https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IN/PDF/IN12310/IN12310.4.pdf.

¹⁹ U.S. Library of Congress, IN12310 (2024).

²⁰ Kristen Bartok Touw, Yisroel Brumer, Nathan Diller et al., *Strategic Edge: A Blueprint for Breakthroughs in Defense Innovation* (Michael R. Bloomberg, 2025), 9, <https://assets.bbhub.io/dotorg/sites/56/2025/01/Strategic-Edge-A-Blueprint-for-Breakthroughs-in-Defense-Innovation.pdf>.

²¹ Touw et al., *Strategic Edge*, 21.

industry leaders. One panelist began discussing testing phases for various weapon system platforms. The Vice President of that section alluded to how she was amazed that multiple systems “spoke to each other” and that she wasn’t aware of their “interoperability” because testing had not been completed “congruently” before. I was shocked. The company didn’t plan for interoperability of their own operating systems. hmm? If defense industrial partners can only cater to the government for specs and not commercially or internationally then they are not agile or interoperable. The last breaking defense article with the defense industrial base will be the most stable when it can produce commercially as a whole and for defense of the warfighter in equal tandem. Interoperability is beyond the usage of equipment being able to be used interchangeably between partner nations (this would be a dream come true on the battlefield), today we need commercial and defense applications that are interoperable. Having dual use systems is advantageous and not having these solutions is atrocious and wasteful.

There are critical minerals and weapon systems that need focused attention as well, as I discussed earlier in this paper. The scarcity of food and clean water is another commodity for which industry and the health care sector need to develop a sustainable plan that can withstand kinetic and non-kinetic attacks. My wargame titled, “What are we going to do when we get stuck?”, conducted through my LLC—Thomas Strategy Consulting, in August of 2025—dove into a U.S. 60 -day denial of resupply of food and water in the second half of the day. The numbers and analysis that came back from the audience of DOW, interagency, defense industry senior leaders, NOAA and USDA experts were sobering.

The industrial base must be agile, scalable, and globally integrated. Industrial companies must be incentivized to produce for both defense and commercial markets, enabling dual-use capacity and surge potential. If the surge potential is not a possibility, then the defense market needs to make it known to the customer and solutions at scale need to be presented. If that includes adding other markets or market shareholders, then that needs to be detailed and scoped. Stockpiling, pre-positioning, and multi-year procurement contracts are essential for the future of the economy.

Future Forward: A Call to Action

The adversary cannot monopolize the U.S. supply chain lines, or there will be a grave loss of national security and a degradation to the economy. The mechanisms set forth in DPA have allowed the economy to remain stagnant. There has been headway on having other financial triggers, such as other transaction authorities, allow the movement of money between government and industry, but it is not enough.

COVID-19, the pandemic, turned the world upside down and showcased that the U.S. alone did not have the resources, equipment, personnel or a resilient supply chain to withstand stability in a time of crisis. The virus alone wiped-out stockpiles of commodities and left the U.S. and others in the trenches for not only medical supplies but highlighted that the U.S. was not stable in other logistics as well and dependent on China²². In short, the DPA is not just a wartime relic — it’s a living instrument of economic statecraft, allowing the U.S. to shape markets, signal resolve, and protect its strategic interests through industrial strength. There are forums and conferences that have open discussions about commodities for warfighters.

In order for the warfighters to have what they need from the defense industrial base, collaboration among the foreign and domestic industrial companies is imperative. Additionally, a collaboration between industrial partners and the government can analyze supply chain stopgaps, and documenting the solutions will assist in having historical data to reference for later events. Initiating a stockpiling initiative by industry or a pre-positioning of essential parts by commercial partners in conjunction with defense input- All efforts, from initiating a stockpiling initiative by industry to a pre-positioning of essential parts by commercial partners in conjunction with defense input, lead back to sustainment for the warfighter being able to have what they need in a protracted conflict.

Forums and conferences offer valuable dialogue, but the warfighter needs action. The U.S. must convene a national industrial mobilization board bringing together defense, industry, academia, and allies. This board should conduct tabletop exercises, publish

²²Maryn McKenna. Amid Coronavirus fears, a mask shortage could spread globally. 2020. <https://www.wired.com/story/amid-coronavirus-fears-a-mask-shortage-could-spread-globally/>

readiness assessments, and recommend legislative reforms.

Key initiatives should include:

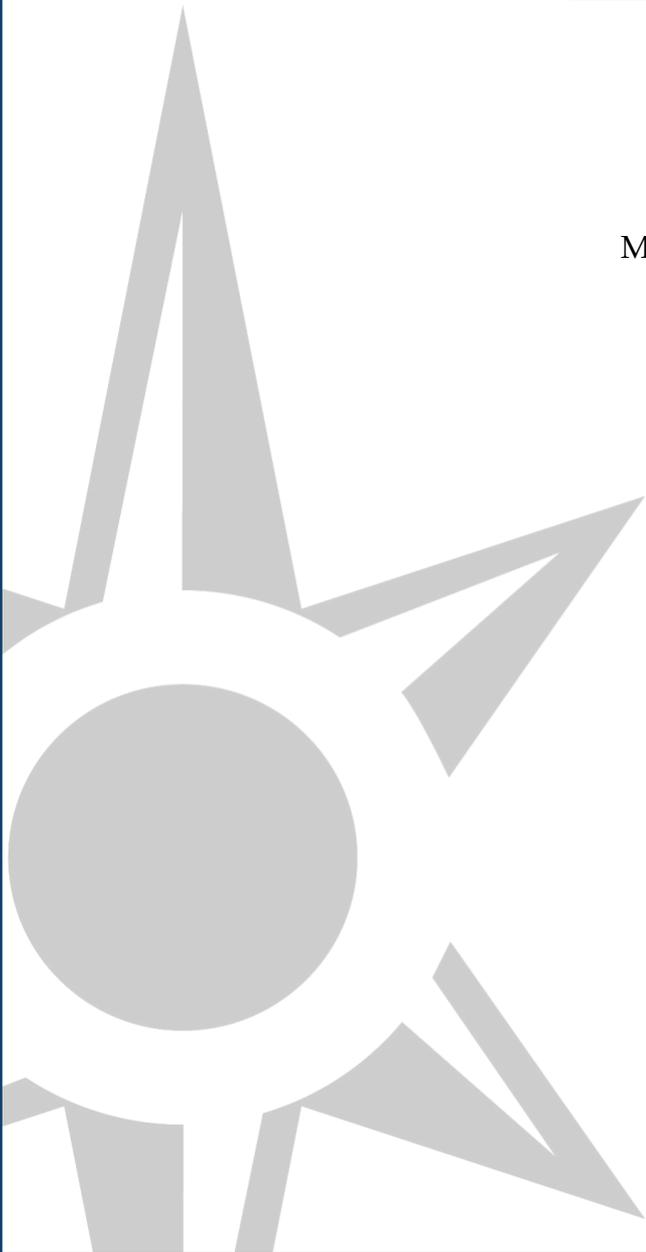
- **Pre-authorized DPA triggers** tied to threat indicators bringing in the Defense Innovation Unit, Defense Intelligence Agency, and Central Intelligence Agency communities.
- **Joint industrial planning boards** with allied nations bringing in partner nations and tie in supply chain resiliency efforts beyond the traditional groups. Looking at OASD LOG tying in with PIPIR from P-DASD Royal's office- Indo-Pacific Security Affairs.
- **Public-private wargames** focused on supply chain resilience bringing industry and the military together. Defense Logistics Agency and tier 2 and tier 3 defense industry partners.
- **Interoperability audits** across equipment portfolios. Maintenance resilience, supply systems in the different military services.
- **Strategic stockpiling mandates** for critical components to include food and clean water where applicable.

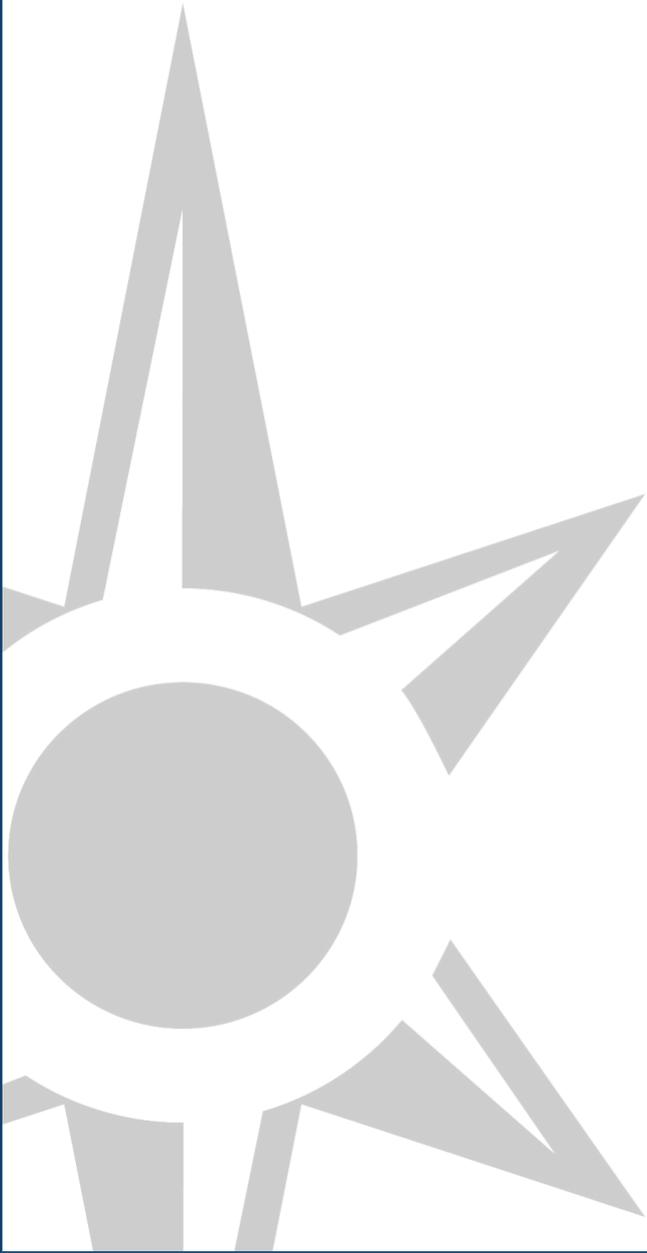
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDRA ROSHONDA THOMAS is an Army Reserve Logistics Officer of 19 years who has served in the US and overseas during wartime. She has served in various assignments that has allowed her insights into the Defense Industrial Base as well as command Soldiers by the hundreds. She consults for various industry clients and supports them through the verification of data and developing their business processes. Under her business firm, Roshonda has hosted defense of the homeland wargames and been selected as a panelist to confer on critical materials, wargaming and supply chain logistics.

The internal security dynamics in the Pacific Island countries: Does it matter to China?

By
Moses Sakai





Executive Summary

Moses Sakai

China's effort in recent years to propose and establish bilateral security relations with the Pacific Island countries (PICs) has become a diplomatic concern to the United States (US) and its allies Australia and New Zealand due to fear of whether or not China through its People's Liberation Army (PLA) would establish a military base in the Pacific. While the security landscape in the Pacific has been largely dominated by US and its ally Australia given that the region has been their 'sphere of influence' since the end of WWII and Cold War, China made it very clear in 2018 through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs that it does not seek any sphere of influence or have any intention to station troops in the Pacific. But China also made it very clear that it would remain a direct stakeholder in the security of the South Pacific. Through its foreign aid, China has focused its attention on PICs' policing by providing material support and building law enforcement capacities to improve policing in the Pacific given that many PICs over the decades have faced internal security challenges related to law and order. These efforts by China on policing including its large infrastructure investment through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have caused Washington to renew its engagement to remain the Pacific power and Canberra to step-up its efforts to maintain its status of being the regional leader in security and economic cooperation in the Pacific. Regardless of the increased efforts by US and its ally Australia due to China's security and economic investment in the Pacific, Beijing will continue to provide policing assistance to PICs. However, what matters in PICs' foreign policy possibilities is that they perceive all parties involved as their development partners regardless of the geopolitical competition between US and its ally Australia and China in the region.

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC), hereafter referred to as China has recently emerged as one of the key regional players in the Pacific. China, for more than a decade, has provided infrastructure development in the Pacific through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Between 1992 and 2021, for instance, China, through its diplomatic relations with the Pacific Island countries (PICs), has [invested](#) USD 5.3 billion in its various economic initiatives, including trade and BRI in the Pacific, according to PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹ However, in recent years, China has proposed and established bilateral security relations with the PICs to help improve their policing, given that many PICs face internal security issues such as law and order, including transnational crime issues and non-traditional security threats related to cybersecurity and climate change.

Beijing's push to establish bilateral security relations with the PICs has become a [concern](#) among PICs traditional partners such as the United States (US), Australia and New Zealand, who have dominated security cooperation in the region since the end of WWII and the Cold War.² While the US and its allies perceive China's growing effort to establish bilateral security relations with the PICs as a threat to the so-called international rules-based order, it has also created [geopolitical tension](#) between the US and its allies and China in the region.³ This paper, despite the great power politics in security cooperation in the Pacific, highlights whether the internal security issues of the small island developing states (SIDs) matter to China's foreign policy in the Pacific.

The great power politics in security cooperation in the Pacific

Competition for influence between the US and its allies and China has recently [intensified](#) in the Pacific.⁴ While the Pacific is considered as one of the peaceful regions in the world envisioned under the [Framework for Pacific Regionalism](#) and reaffirmed in the [2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security](#), it has recently become a playground for [big powers to project](#) their hard and soft power through the rapid increase of political, economic and security engagement in the region.⁵ In fact, Beijing's ever-growing influence through its engagement in the Pacific has already challenged Washington's status as the Pacific power and Canberra's regional leadership in both security and economic cooperation in the Pacific.

The intensity of the rivalry between Washington and its allies in the Pacific (i.e. Canberra and Wellington) and Beijing reached its pinnacle when the Solomon Islands (a small island nation in the south western Pacific) in April 2022, led by former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare [signed](#) a bilateral security agreement with China.⁶ This move was Beijing's first attempt to establish a bilateral security agreement with a Pacific Island country since its diplomatic engagement in the region. While the nature of the bilateral security agreement between Beijing and Honiara still [remains secretive](#), what became [more concerning to the US and its allies](#) was the fact that the agreement could potentially result in the establishment of a Chinese military base in the Solomon Islands as part of PRC's People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) effort to expand its naval influence in the Pacific.⁷ However, according to the draft agreement [leaked](#) on social media in March 2022, it

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. 2022. "Fact Sheet: Cooperation Between China and Pacific Island Countries." Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. May 24. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367460.html#:~:text=Located%20at%20the%20southward%20extension,plans%20with%20PNG%20and%20Vanuatu.

² Jonathan Pryke. 2020. "The risks of China's ambitions in the South Pacific." Brookings. July 20. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/#:~:text=Facing%20a%20potential%2010%25%20economic%20contraction%20this,comparison%20to%20that%20provided%20by%20traditional%20partners.>

³ Meg Keen and Alan Tidwell. 2024. "Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands: Praying for advantage." Lowy Institute. January 31. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/geopolitics-pacific-islands-playing-advantage>

⁴ Keen and Tidwell. "Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands."

⁵ Pacific Islands Forum. 2014. "The Framework for Pacific Regionalism." Pacific Islands Forum. July. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/pacific-robp-2015-2017-sd.pdf>; Pacific Islands Forum. 2018.

"Boe Declaration on Regional Security." Pacific Islands Forum. September 5. <https://forumsec.org/publications/boe-declaration-regional-security>; Daniel Hurst. 2023. "Climate crisis and China-US rivalry: five top takeaways from the Pacific's most important summit." *The Guardian*. November 11. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/11/climate-crisis-and-china-us-rivalry-five-top-takeaways-from-the-pacifics-most-important-summit?CMP=share_btn_link

⁶ Kate Lyons and Dorothy Wickham. 2022. "The deal that shocked the world: inside the China-Solomons security pact." *The Guardian*. April 20. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/20/the-deal-that-shocked-the-world-inside-the-china-solomons-security-pact>

⁷ Centre for Strategic and International Studies. 2025. "Member of Parliament Peter Kenilorea on Solomon Islands-China Relations". CSIS Pacific Policy Pulse Interview (YouTube Channel). April 18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3OSx-iqPC8>; Tarcisius Kabutaulaka. 2022. "China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. December 2. <https://gia.georgetown.edu/2022/12/02/china-solomon-islands-security-agreement-and-competition-for-influence-in-oceania/>

provides for the deployment of Chinese “police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to the Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order” upon consensus between the two countries through a formal request by the government of the Solomon Islands.⁸

Washington and Canberra, prompted by the China-Solomon Islands security pact which was [dubbed](#) as ‘controversial’ due to its secretive military nature, undertook sweeping efforts in diplomatic engagements in the Pacific to contain growing Chinese influence in the region.⁹ The US and Australia’s containment efforts include a range of security and economic initiatives established through bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagements with the PICs. The US, under the former Biden administration, has [signed](#) defense cooperation agreements (DCA) with Papua New Guinea (PNG) in May 2023 and with [Fiji](#) in November 2024.¹⁰ While the US-PNG DCA is an expansion of the 1989 status of forces agreement (SOFA) between the two countries aimed at strengthening defense partnership including capacity building and US military access to PNG’s major airports and seaports, the US DCA with Fiji was an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) [aimed](#) to enable efficient transfer of fuel and medical supplies and the use of maintenance facilities during emergencies.¹¹ The US DCAs with PNG and Fiji (two of the only three countries in the Pacific that have national defense) reinforces its military presence in the Pacific as the Pacific theatre is strategically significant to the US’s national security interests under its broader [Indo-](#)

[Pacific framework](#) to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and simultaneously maintain the rules-based order.¹²

The US, for the first time since the end of WWII , under the Biden administration, renewed its engagement in the Pacific through the two summits held on the September of [2022](#) and [2023](#) with the PICs leaders (Manasseh Sogavare, being the PM at the time of Solomon Islands [did not attend](#) the second summit due to his pro-China figure rhetoric).¹³ The [outcome](#) of the two summits was the [US-Pacific Partnership Strategy](#) (USPPS), aimed to enhance Washington’s relationship with the members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the US pledging over \$800 million to support regional development priorities.¹⁴ In addition, one of the key achievements of the Biden-Harris administration was the [renewal](#) of another 20-year Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreement with the freely associated states (FAS) of the Marshall Islands, Republic of Palau, and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).¹⁵ The cofa with the three Pacific island states secured Washington’s presence in the Northern Pacific. FSM in particular is a [key area strategically significant](#) to the US’s national security interests under its Indo-Pacific Strategy.¹⁶

The cofa with FSM gave Washington [exclusive defense rights](#) to its land and sea for US military use as FSM sits on the Second Island Chain - a string of islands Washington has long perceived as strategically important to support its military operations in the wider Indo-Pacific and to contain

⁸ Anna Powles. 2022. “The draft security cooperation agreement between China and Solomon Islands has been [leaked] on social media and raises a lot of questions (and concerns). (photos of agreement in this and below tweet) 1/6”. March 24 on X (Formerly Twitter). <https://x.com/annapowles/status/1506845794728837120>

⁹ Reuters. 2023. “Solomon Islands signs controversial policing pact with China.” *The Guardian*. July 10. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/11/solomon-islands-signs-controversial-policing-pact-with-china>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State. 2023. “Agreement Between the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA and PAPUA NEW GUINEA.” *U.S. Department of State*. August 16. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/63374-Papua-New-Guinea-Defense-08.16.2023.pdf>; Joseph Clark. 2024. “Austin Bolsters U.S. Cooperation With Fiji, Concludes 12th Trip to Indo-Pacific.” *U.S. Department of War*. November 23. <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3976773/austin-bolsters-us-cooperation-with-fiji-concludes-12th-trip-to-indo-pacific/>

¹¹ Clark. “Austin Bolsters U.S. Cooperation With Fiji.”

¹² The White House. 2022. “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States.” The White House. February. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

¹³ U.S. Department of State. 2022. “U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit.” *U.S. Department of State*. September. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-pacific-islands-country-summit/>; U.S. Department of State. 2023. “U.S.-Pacific

Island Forum Leader’s Summit.” *U.S. Department of State*. September. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-pacific-island-forum-leaders-summit/>; Nick Sas, Tim Swanston, and Chrisnrita Aumanu-Leong. 2023. “Solomon Islands PM blasts the United States after missing Pacific Leaders’ Summit at White House.” *ABC News*. September 27. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-27/solomon-islands-sogavare-blasts-united-states-after-summit-snub/102908430>

¹⁴ Pacific Islands Forum. 2023. “REPORTS: Joint statement of the US-Pacific Forum Leaders, September 25th 2023.” *Pacific Islands Forum*. September 27. <https://forumsec.org/publications/reports-joint-statement-us-pacific-forum-leaders-september-25th-2023/>; The White House. 2022. “Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership.” *The White House*. September 29. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/declaration-on-u-s-pacific-partnership/>

¹⁵ U.S. EMBASSY MARSHALL ISLANDS. 2024. “UNITED STATES AND MARSHALL ISLANDS CELEBRATE RENEWAL OF COMPACT OF FREE ASSOCIATION.” *U.S. EMBASSY IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS*. November 13. <https://mh.usembassy.gov/united-states-and-marshall-islands-celebrate-renewal-of-compact-of-free-association/>

¹⁶ Mar-Vic Cagurangan. 2024. “Micronesia president says US beefing up military capabilities in the Pacific country.” *The Guardian*. April 9. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/10/micronesia-president-wesley-simina-military-capabilities-us-airport-upgrade-yap>

Beijing's influence in the region.¹⁷ The FSM's President Wesley Simina [stated](#) that "[his country] is open for US consideration for any kind of defense-related activities, including use of [its] lands and oceans".¹⁸ Under the terms of the cofa with FSM, the US has already proposed through the 2025 federal budget a \$400 million to upgrade Yap airfield to boost its defense capabilities in the region.

Collectively with its like-minded allies and partners like Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United Kingdom (UK), the US-led Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) was [established](#) to bolster regionalism and support regional priorities envisaged in the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific](#) Continent, PIF's long-term vision.¹⁹ However, the clearest demonstration of Washington's renewed Pacific engagement has been its expanded Coast Guard cooperation with countries like PNG, following the signing of the DCA and the Shiprider agreement (formally the Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations Agreement signed on the same day as DCA).²⁰ The Shiprider agreement in particular has [enabled](#) the PNG Defense Force (PNGDF) to conduct joint-military and patrol exercises on board the US Coast Guard in PNG's territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) as part of the effort to enforce PNG maritime laws, including combating transnational illicit activities like illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.²¹

Despite the [freezing](#) of the USAID this year in the Pacific and globally although it was expanded to Fiji for the first time under the Biden administration, the Trump administration made an effort through the current leadership of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) to [build a \\$400 million](#)

(approximately K1.6 billion local currency) large-scale fuel storage facility to address fuel security in PNG in accordance with the framework of the 2023 DCA between the two countries.²² Although the fuel storage investment was a key strategic US defence initiative under the second Trump administration in PNG and the Pacific to advance the US national security interests, it occurred at the time when senior government officials from PNG, led by the deputy speaker of parliament Koni Iguan were invited to visit a senior political official from the International Department of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee to further strengthen comprehensive strategic partnership between Beijing and Port Moresby. China, by acknowledging the 50-year diplomatic ties with PNG emphasized that "[Beijing] is willing to work with [PNG] and other Global South countries to resist unilateralism, hegemonism and expansionism, and jointly safeguard the common interests of developing countries".²³

Canberra, on the other hand, has also increased its engagement in the Pacific to maintain the status of being the regional leader in security and economic cooperation. Within a span of a year (Between December 2022 and December 2023), Australia [signed three bilateral security agreements](#) with Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and PNG to address their security challenges and help improve their respective internal policing capacity, with a recognition that the security challenges each of the three countries would affect Australia's security interests in the Pacific.²⁴ The [Canberra-funded Pacific Policing Initiative](#) (PPI) was a strategic win for Australia in its effort to contain China in the Pacific.²⁵ Endorsed by the PIF leaders in their 53rd Meeting held in Tonga in 2024, the PPI is a

¹⁷ Mar-Vic Cagurangan. 2024. "US military beefing up border infrastructure around FSM." *Pacific Island Times*. December 3. <https://www.pacificislandtimes.com/post/us-military-beefing-up-border-infrastructure-throughout-fsm>

¹⁸ Cagurangan. "Micronesia president says US beefing up military capabilities in the Pacific country."

¹⁹ Daniel J. Krittenbrink. 2023. "Readout of The Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) Ministerial." U.S. Department of State. September 22. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/briefings-foreign-press-centers/readout-of-pbp-ministerial/>; Pacific Islands Forum. 2022. "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent." Pacific Islands Forum. <https://forumsec.org/2050>

²⁰ U.S. MISSION PAPUA NEW GUINEA. 2024. "PNG COMPLETES THIRD JOINT PATROL UNDER SHIPRIDER AGREEMENT." U.S. EMBASSY TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA. March 19. <https://pg.usembassy.gov/third-joint-patrol-under-shiprider-agreement/>; U.S. Department of State Office of Treaty Affairs. 2023. "Papua New Guinea (23-816.1) – Agreement Concerning Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations." U.S. Department of State. August 16. <https://www.state.gov/papua-new-guinea-23-816.1>

²¹ U.S. MISSION PAPUA NEW GUINEA. "PNG COMPLETES THIRD JOINT PATROL UNDER SHIPRIDER AGREEMENT."

²² Kirsty Needham. 2025. "Fiji leader to press Pacific Islands concerns in Washington after U.S. aid frozen." *Reuters*. February 4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/fiji-leader-press-pacific-islands-concerns-washington-after-us-aid-frozen-2025-02-04/>; U.S. MISSION PAPUA NEW GUINEA. 2024. "U.S. INVESTS K1.6 BILLION IN INCREASED FUEL STORAGE: FULFILLS PNG GOVERNMENT REQUEST." U.S. EMBASSY TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA. <https://pg.usembassy.gov/u-s-invests-k1-6-billion-in-increased-fuel-storage-fulfills-png-government-request/>

²³ International Department, Central Committee of CPC. 2025. "Liu Jianchao Meets with a Delegation of Papua New Guinea." International Department, Central Committee of CPC. April 20. https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/bzhd/202504/t20250427_166908.html

²⁴ James Batley. 2024. "Comment: One year, three agreements – shaping thinking on regional security." *Australia Pacific Business Connections*. January 15. <https://apibc.org.au/news/comment-one-year-three-agreements-shaping-thinking-on-regional-security/>

²⁵ The Hon Anthony Albanese MP. 2024. "Pacific leaders endorse Pacific Policing Initiative." PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA The Hon Anthony Albanese MP. August 28. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/pacific-leaders-endorse-pacific-policing-initiative>

[Pacific-led initiative](#) built upon the notion of Australia's 'Pacific Family' under which Australia will remain the partner of choice in security cooperation for the Pacific, a key foreign policy initiative [envisioned](#) under Australia's 2024 National Defense Strategy.²⁶

While Australia remains the PIC's [largest aid partner](#) according to its [official development assistance](#) (ODA) in the Pacific, PRC's infrastructure development in the Pacific through BRI has challenged Australia's development efforts in the region.²⁷ Canberra, through its Pacific 'step-up', [introduced](#) the \$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility (AIFF) for the Pacific to increase its engagement and infrastructure spending in the region, as BRI was [accused](#) of debt-trap diplomacy.²⁸ The [re-election](#) of Albanese's Labor government in May this year would most likely result in driving these foreign policy initiatives, as some of them occurred under Albanese's leadership.²⁹ For instance, Canberra's A\$600 million National Rugby League (NRL) [offer](#) to PNG, [signed](#) early this year, came on the condition that PNG would not establish any bilateral security relations with China.³⁰ However, the A\$600m NRL deal was [listed](#) as an 'unspecified contingent liability' item in the [Australian federal budget delivered](#) by the Treasurer in March 2025.³¹ This means it may or may not happen in the future, as it would have serious financial implications for Australia. The challenge for the Albanese

government is to prioritize this issue within its Pacific foreign policy agenda as it emerged during the Prime Minister's time in office and is central to containing Beijing's security influence in the region.³²

Challenged by the narrative surrounding the state of permanent contest for influence with China in the Pacific,³³ Australia has not only reinforced its regional leadership in security cooperation in the Pacific but also consolidated its security presence in PNG through the Mutual Defence Treaty (or the Pukpuk Treaty) signed in October this year by Prime Ministers of both countries. The Pukpuk Treaty between Australia and PNG elevates both countries' bilateral defence status to that of an "alliance" by recognizing that an armed attack on either of them would be an attack on both. This is a first alliance Australia has established with an indigenous Pacific country apart from Canberra's 70-year alliance with Wellington and Washington through ANZUS.³⁴

While the Pukpuk Treaty enables both countries to address their shared common security challenges as it is an expansion of their 1977 status of forces agreement, it is also an effort to further strengthen Australia's security presence in the Pacific given that PNG has been strategically significant to Canberra's national security interests and the security interest of its ally, US in the broader Indo-Pacific.³⁵ Since 2018, for instance, Canberra and Washington have [conducted](#) their naval activities in PNG after a joint-

²⁶ PACIFIC ISLANDS CHIEFS OF POLICE. 2025. "PACIFIC POLICING INITIATIVE." PACIFIC ISLANDS CHIEFS OF POLICE. September 24. <https://www.picp.co.nz/post/pacific-policing-initiative>; The Australian Government. 2024. "2024 National Defence Strategy and 2024 Integrated Investment Program." The Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program>

²⁷ Lowy Institute. "2025 Pacific Aid Map: Australia holds the line as major aid donors retreat from Pacific." Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/2025-pacific-aid-map-australia-holds-line-major-aid-donors-retreat-pacific> The Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. "Australia's Official Development Assistance Budget Summary 2025-26." The Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/corporate/portfolio-budget-statements/australias-official-development-assistance-budget-summary-2025-26>

²⁸ Parliament of Australia. "4. Engagement with the Step-up." Parliament of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/womenandgirlsPacific/Report/section?id=committees%2Freportjnt%2F024631%2F75844; Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant and Jonathan Pryke. 2019. "Ocean of debt? Belt and Road and debt diplomacy in the Pacific." Lowy Institute. October 21. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/ocean-debt-belt-road-debt-diplomacy-pacific>

²⁹ Pacific Beat. 2025. "What does Labor's emphatic election win mean for the Pacific?" ABC Pacific. May 4. <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/aus-elex/105252314>

³⁰ The Hon Anthony Albanese MP and The Honourable James Marape MP. 2024. "Deepening Australia-Papua New Guinea ties through rugby league."

Prime Minister of Australia The Hon Anthony Albanese MP. December 12. [https://www.pm.gov.au/media/deepening-australia-papua-new-guinea-ties-through-rugby-league#:~:text=The%20Australian%20and%20Papua%20New,competition%20no%20later%20than%202028](https://www.pm.gov.au/media/deepening-australia-papua-new-guinea-ties-through-rugby-league#:~:text=The%20Australian%20and%20Papua%20New,competition%20no%20later%20than%202028;); DW. 2024. "Australia seals PNG rugby deal to counter Chinese influence." DW. December 12. <https://www.dw.com/en/australia-seals-png-rugby-deal-to-counter-chinese-influence/a-71030048>

³¹ Greg Earl. 2025. "Budget 2025: Trump-proofing Labor's poll chances." Lowy Institute. March 27. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/budget-2025-trump-proofing-labor-s-poll-chances>; The Australian Government Department of the Treasury. 2025. "Building Australia's future." The Australian Government Department of the Treasury. March. <https://budget.gov.au/index.htm>

³² The National. 2025. "NRL set itself as unity force against China in PNG". The National. December 9. <https://www.thenational.com.pg/nrl-sets-itself-as-unity-force-against-china-in-png/>

³³ Ben Doherty. 2025. "Diplomatic knife fight over PNG enters new phase with deepening Australia defence deal". The Guardian. August 23. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/23/diplomatic-knife-fight-over-png-enters-new-phase-with-deepening-australia-defence-deal>

³⁴ Moses Sakai. 2025. "The Papua New Guinea Mutual Defence Treaty: Alliance or partnership." Pacific Forum PacNet#82. 10 October. <https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-82-the-papua-new-guinea-australia-mutual-defence-treaty-alliance-or-partnership/>

³⁵ The Australian Government. 2025. "Joint Statement: Australia-Papua New Guinea Defence Ministers' Meeting." The Australian Government. February 20. <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2025-02-20/joint-statement-australia-papua-new-guinea-defence-ministers-meeting>

agreement (Wellington included) with PNG Defense Force (PNGDF) to upgrade the dilapidated Lombrum Naval Base in PNG's Manus province, as Lombrum is one of the key areas to expand their strategic and security interests in the wider Indo-Pacific through joint-military and naval exercises and coast guard cooperation.³⁶

PRC's security efforts in the Pacific

The internal security issues faced by many PICs are largely due to challenges [associated with capacity](#) and a lack of coordination and collaboration within their respective national security agencies, including the intelligence communities.³⁷ For instance, the [January 10 riots](#) in Port Moresby, widely referred to as "Black Wednesday" were sparked by a lack of coordination within its law enforcement agencies, including poor communication and intelligence sharing.³⁸ Prompted by the riots, Beijing [offered](#) PNG a bilateral security deal aimed to improve PNG's internal policing capacity to address its law and order situation, given that most of the Chinese business communities were also affected during the riots.³⁹ However, the bilateral policing offer from PRC was declined as PNG was [urged](#) by Canberra not to take the deal because PNG already had a similar bilateral security arrangement with Australia and that for PNG and other PICs, Canberra will remain their security partner of choice while PRC as their economic partner.⁴⁰

Unlike PNG, Solomon Islands, prior to the secretive bilateral security deal, for instance, had a [formal policing arrangement](#) with China in January 2022.⁴¹ The policing arrangement was made between the Solomon Islands Royal Police Force (SIRPF) and the Ministry of Public Security of China through a

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The government of Solomon Islands at the time took the initiative as a [measure to respond](#) to the country's hard and soft domestic threats.⁴² Although there was existing policing support from Solomon Islands' bilateral partners like PNG, Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji following the November 2021 riots in Honiara, the policing arrangement with Beijing formalized the [deployment](#) of the China Police Liaison Team (CPLT) to help maintain social order, as many Chinese communities were also targeted during the riots.⁴³ According to the Solomon Islands government at the time, it was part of the effort to implement its [2020 National Security Strategy](#) and fundamentally uphold its foreign policy framework of 'friends to all and enemies to none', a common foreign policy mantra of PICs.⁴⁴

But China has provided security assistance to PICs at the very minimum level through its foreign aid program. Capacity building – through the training of police and military personnel, as well as the provision of material support to strengthen law enforcement – is a key element of China's foreign policy in the Pacific. For instance, Fiji was the first country in the Pacific to have a [formal bilateral policing agreement](#) with China in 2011 focusing on areas such as search and rescue, counter-terrorism, anti-money laundering, human trafficking and cyber-crime. Through an MoU between the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) of China and the Fiji Police Force, Fijian police officers were trained in China, while MPS liaison officers were deployed in Fiji for a period of 3 to 6 months on attachment programs to support Fiji's law enforcement efforts.⁴⁵ In 2024, China [opened](#) a new \$33 million Police Academy Training Centre in Samoa's capital, Apia,⁴⁶ initially [formalized](#) in 2017 as one of the projects under the

³⁶ Alan Tidwell. 2025. "United States security cooperation among the Pacific Islands." Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003613190-10/united-states-security-cooperation-among-pacific-islands-alan-tidwell>

³⁷ Pacific Island Times. 2024. "Policing the Pacific by the Pacific." *Pacific Island Times*. October 12. <https://www.pacificislandtimes.com/post/policing-the-pacific-by-the-pacific>

³⁸ The National. 2024. "Civil riots see the country get off to a terrible start." *The National*. February 1. <https://www.thenational.com.pg/civil-riots-see-the-country-get-off-to-a-terrible-start/>

³⁹ Kirsty Needham. 2024. "China, Papua New Guinea in talks on policing, security cooperation - minister." *Reuters*. January 29. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-papua-new-guinea-talks-policing-security-cooperation-minister-2024-01-29/>

⁴⁰ Reuters. 2024. "Australia the 'security partner of choice' in South Pacific - PM Albanese." *Reuters*. January 30. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-security-partner-choice-south-pacific-pm-albanese-2024-01-30/>

⁴¹ Peter Connolly. 2024. "China's Police Security in the Pacific Islands." *The National Bureau of Asian Research*. May 30.

<https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-police-security-in-the-pacific-islands/>

⁴² GCU Press. 2022. "SOLOMON ISLANDS AND CHINA INITIAL FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT ON SECURITY COOPERATION." March 31. Solomon Islands Government. <https://solomons.gov.sb/solomon-islands-and-china-initial-framework-agreement-on-security-cooperation/>

⁴³ Anna Powles. 2023. "Geopolitical duel in the Pacific: Solomon Islands security at risk as Australia and China compete." Lowy Institute. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/geopolitical-duel-pacific-solomon-islands-security-risk-australia-china-compete>

⁴⁴ Solomon Islands Government. 2020. "Solomons National Security Strategy." Solomon Islands Government. October. <https://pacificsecurity.net/resource/solomons-national-security-strategy/>

⁴⁵ Cameron Hill. 2018. "China's policing assistance in the Pacific: a new era?" *Parliament of Australia*. April 6. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/FlagPost/2018/April/china-pacific-police

⁴⁶ Jasmine Netzler-Iose. 2024. "\$33 million Samoa Police Training Academy officially Handed over at Tafaigata". *Samoa Global News (Government*

Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement signed between Beijing and Apia.⁴⁷

While China has [funded](#) the construction of the police headquarters in the Cook Islands, countries like Vanuatu and PNG have [received material support](#) from Beijing.⁴⁸ In PNG, for instance, \$3 million worth of law enforcement materials were given by China to [support](#) the country's police and defense forces' security operations in 2018 when PNG hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Summit in the capital, Port Moresby.⁴⁹ The material package to PNG also included 83 PNGDF personnel being trained in China as part of the effort to prepare for the APEC summit.

The security assistance provided by Beijing to the PICs focuses on improving the internal policing capacity through training and material assistance to support law enforcement efforts. Although PLA has [visited](#) several PICs between 2002 and 2019 through its senior officials, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, during a press conference in Port Moresby with his former PNG counterpart Soroi Eoe, [stated](#) clearly at the end of his 10-day Pacific tour in June 2022 that China has no intention "to station troops or build military bases [in the Pacific].⁵⁰ China stands ready to work with Pacific island countries to expand consensus on regional cooperation, not to sign any regional security agreement". As a response to the China-Solomon Islands security pact to Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has affirmed that China remain a [direct stakeholder in the security of the South Pacific region](#) and does not seek 'spheres of influence' in the Pacific.⁵¹ Among the list of [measures](#) to be implemented by China this year, as agreed in May 2025 at the third China-PICs Foreign Ministers'

Meeting in Xiamen, is police and law enforcement cooperation through training and capacity-building efforts.⁵²

Conclusion

Regardless of the broader geopolitical dynamics shaping security cooperation in the Pacific between China, the United States and its allies, Beijing will continue to provide security assistance through police training and material support to improve law enforcement with the PICs. The US and its allies (Australia and New Zealand) have entirely dominated the external security environment (i.e., defense) in the Pacific since 1945. France and the United Kingdom (UK), given that both still have colonies in the region, have expanded their military presence in the Pacific to support the effort of ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific and to contain Beijing's influence in the Pacific through [formal security partnerships with PNG](#) after the 2022 China-Solomon Islands bilateral security pact.⁵³ Choosing a side is not an option in PICs foreign policy possibilities because their bilateral and diplomatic engagement with the West and China is driven largely by their respective national interests and development priorities.

However, despite PIC's foreign policy positions, two key external challenges remain unavoidable. First, PICs have been placed in an uncomfortable diplomatic position with their 'traditional partners' when they make an effort to establish a 'bilateral security partnership' with China. Second, it has become a diplomatic concern in terms of the relationship between Beijing and PICs if One China policy is not acknowledged by PICs that Taiwan is part of China. The former is the cause of the

Press Release). August 20. <https://samoaglobalnews.com/33-million-samoa-police-training-academy-officially-handed-over-at-tafaigata/>

⁴⁷ Cameron Hill. 2018. "China's policing assistance in the Pacific: a new era?" Parliament of Australia. April 6. https://www.aph.gov.au/About/Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/FlagPost/2018/April/china-pacific-police

⁴⁸ Cook Islands News. 2014. "\$800k to repair Chinese-built buildings." *Cook Islands News*. November 4. <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/economy/800k-to-repair-chinese-built-buildings/>; Hill. "China's policing assistance in the Pacific."

⁴⁹ The National. 2017. "China supports Defence force with K17.5 million gift." *The National*. November 7. <https://www.thenational.com.pg/china-supports-defence-force-k17-5-million-gift/>

⁵⁰ Denghua Zhang. 2021. "Pacific Islands in China's security and future engagement." The Australian National University. February. https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DB82_Part7.pdf ; Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. 2022. "Wang Yi on China-Solomon Islands bilateral security cooperation." Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. June 3. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzd/202206/t20220603_10698478.html

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. 2022. "China and Australia Exchanges Views on South Pacific Affairs." Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. May 9. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2797_665439/3377_664820/3379_664824/202205/t20220509_10683511.html

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. 2025. "List of Measures for China to Implement the Consensus of the Third China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting." Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. May 28. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzd/202505/t20250528_11635736.html ; Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. 2025. "Wang Yi on the Consensus Reached at the Third China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting." Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China. May 28. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzbzd/202505/t20250529_11636487.html

⁵³ Moses Sakai. 2024. "Will Papua New Guinea sign a bilateral security deal with China?" Pacific Forum. March 8. <https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-15-will-papua-new-guinea-sign-a-bilateral-security-deal-with-china/>

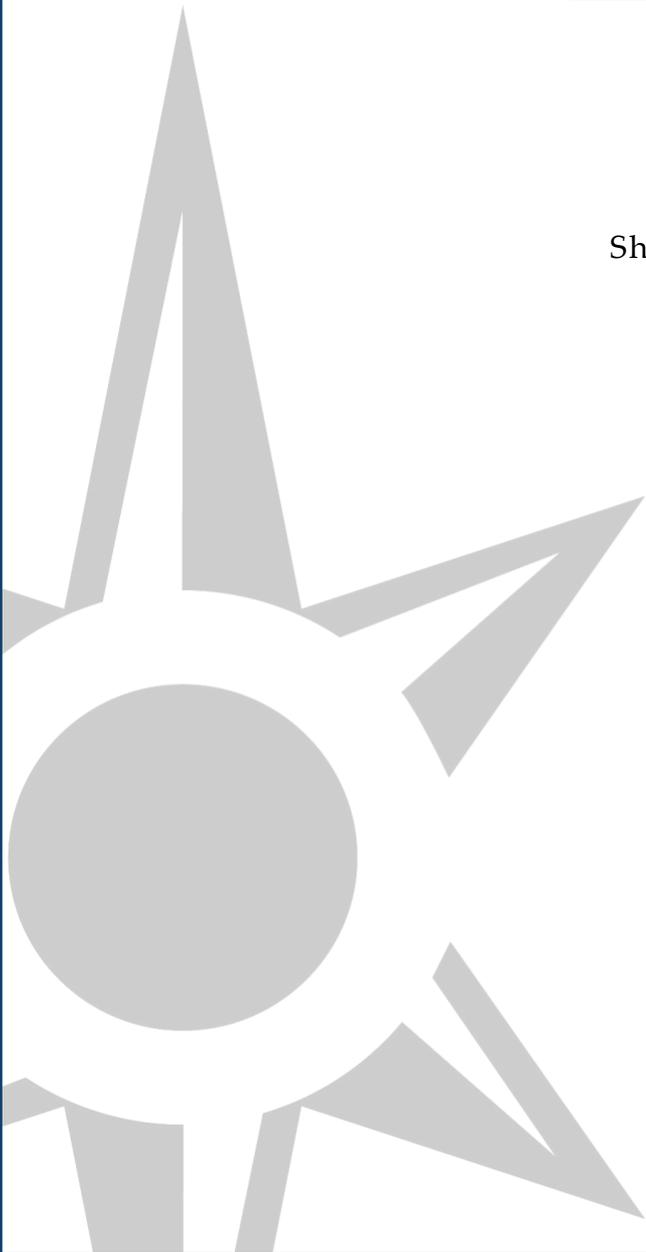
geopolitics in the Pacific between PIC's traditional partners and China, while the latter is Beijing's effort to contain Taiwan's diplomatic presence in the Pacific. The Pacific is the region critical to the development of PICs' traditional partners and China's. Regardless of the geopolitics, the very essence of PIC's engagement with its traditional partners and China is to meet their respective development priorities both at the domestic and regional levels through security and economic cooperation. And that is what matters in PICs' foreign and regional policies and not necessarily being friends to all and enemies to none.

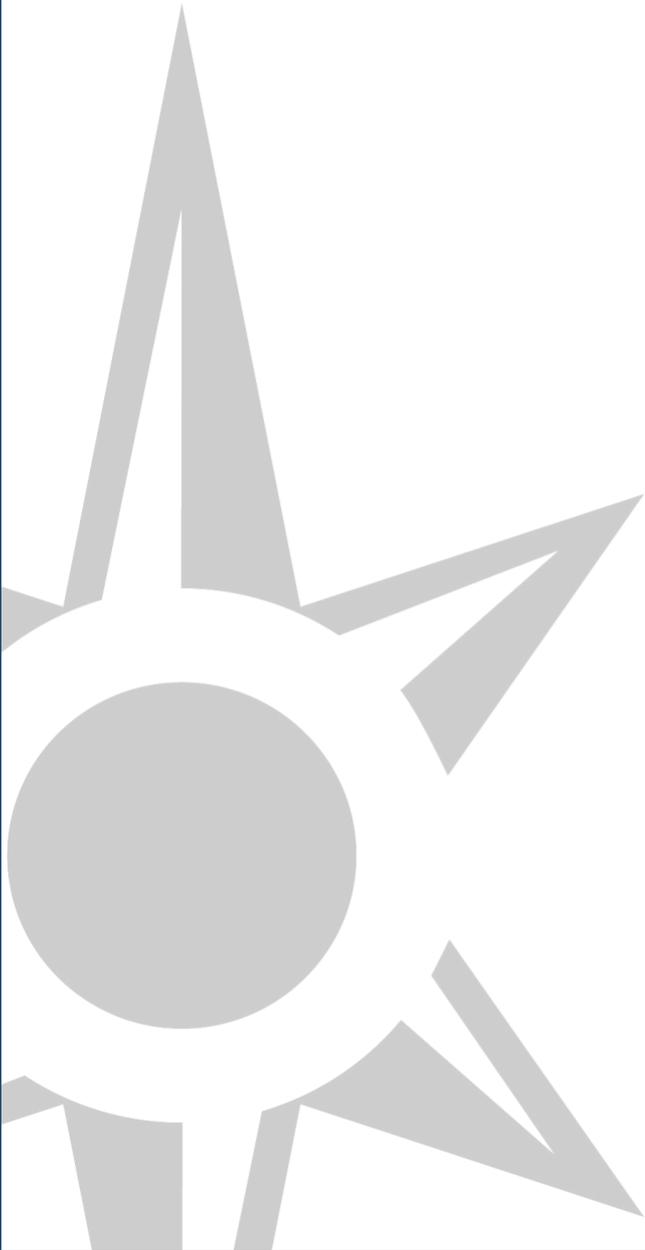
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MOSES SAKAI is a Research Fellow at the Papua New Guinea National Research Institute and a member of the Young Leaders Program of the Pacific Forum. In June-July 2024, Moses was a visiting scholar on US Foreign Policy at the University of Delaware under the US State Department's Study of the US Institute (SUSI) for Scholars Program. He is also a Regional Research Associate (honorary) since August 2025 of the Indo-Pacific Studies Centre (IPSC), a Sydney-based foreign policy think tank in Australia.

From Hedging to Bandwagoning: Brunei Meets Dilemma Between Territorial Integrity and Economic Security

By
Sheewon Min





Executive Summary

Sheewon Min

In the traditional framework of international relations and statehood, territorial integrity is a foundational element of sovereignty. Historically, national security has been primarily defined in terms of protecting territorial borders and maintaining military strength. Securing land and maritime claims has therefore been viewed as a non-negotiable aspect of a state's identity and function.

However, in the era of globalization, where economic interdependence and transnational flows of capital and investment shape global power dynamics, the meaning of security has broadened. Increasingly, economic security—ensuring access to investment, infrastructure development, and long-term economic growth—has emerged as a core pillar of national strategy.

This evolving understanding of national security raises an important and timely question: When traditional (territorial) security and non-traditional (economic) security priorities come into conflict, which does a state prioritize? This paper investigates that question by examining the divergent strategic behaviors of Brunei Darussalam that is a claimant in the South China Sea (SCS) dispute and yet has adopted a markedly different approach toward China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Whereas other states in the region, notably the Philippines, have taken a more confrontational approach by opting out of the BRI and asserting its maritime claims amid rising tensions with China, Brunei has remained engaged with China actively, embraced BRI initiatives, and maintained a low-profile stance on the territorial dispute. This divergence is particularly striking given the broader geopolitical context in which ASEAN countries have traditionally adhered to policies of neutrality and non-alignment amid great power competition. The key question, then, is this: What accounts for Brunei's strategic departure from the conventional approach that prioritizes territorial sovereignty over economic cooperation, and how can this behavior be theoretically conceptualized?

Brunei's foreign policy and strategic decision-making remain relatively understudied, particularly in comparison to other Southeast Asian states. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining Brunei's strategic divergence through the lens of its national priorities, development goals, and alignment choices with major powers. The central argument is that Brunei's prioritization of economic security over territorial defense—unlike the approaches of other ASEAN claimants—is primarily driven by its domestic development agenda and broader geopolitical calculations. Specifically, Brunei's decision to deepen engagement with China through the BRI despite unresolved maritime disputes is best understood in the context of its long-term economic diversification strategy as outlined in *Wawasan 2035*. At the same time, Brunei's relatively limited—and arguably, declining—defense cooperation with the United States, especially when contrasted with the Philippines' robust security alliance with Washington, has shaped its perception of the U.S. as an unreliable partner. This has contributed to Brunei's increasing alignment with Beijing, which it views as a more consistent and beneficial partner. Theoretically, this strategic shift can be conceptualized as a move from hedging to bandwagoning—an emerging trend in Southeast Asia that warrants closer examination.

While existing scholarship has largely emphasized common patterns in Southeast Asian political strategies (especially given the ASEAN framework that promotes shared goals and interests), comparative differences in state behavior remain relatively underexplored. Therefore, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how states diverge in their approaches to great power competition, shaped by differing national priorities and strategic calculations, including perceived benefits and the reliability of major powers. In doing so, it advances the study of foreign policy decision-making, particularly in explaining how states balance competing security agendas in light of domestic imperatives and shifting international alignments.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, has emerged as a central pillar of China's contemporary foreign policy and economic statecraft, closely aligned with the broader vision of the "rejuvenation of the Chinese Dream."¹ The initiative aims to promote connectivity and economic integration across Asia, Europe, and Africa through an expansive network of infrastructure projects encompassing both overland and maritime corridors.² While Beijing continues to promote the BRI as a platform for mutual cooperation and development, the initiative has faced growing skepticism and backlash from participating countries. Some states have even chosen to withdraw or reduce their engagement when the BRI is perceived to conflict with their national interests. For example, in late 2023, the Philippines formally announced its withdrawal from the initiative, arguably due to escalating tensions with China over maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea.³ Similarly, in December 2023, Italy, the only G7 member state to join the initiative, publicly declared its decision to exit the BRI, expressing dissatisfaction with unfulfilled economic expectations and signaling a broader strategic reassessment of its bilateral relationship with China.⁴

While Manila and Rome have publicly signaled a reduction in engagement with China due to mounting security concerns, this shift does not indicate a consistent trend among similarly positioned states. Notably, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei—all of which have overlapping maritime claims with China in the South China Sea, like the Philippines—continue to participate in the BRI. While Vietnam and Malaysia warrant separate case studies, this paper focuses on Brunei as a particularly distinctive case: a South China Sea claimant that maintains close economic ties with China through sustained BRI engagement.

By analyzing Brunei's political behavior within the dual context of territorial disputes and economic interdependence, this study explores how this small

state navigates the tension between traditional security concerns such as territorial sovereignty and non-traditional priorities, particularly economic resilience, in the great power rivalry. Rather than pursuing a balanced or hedging approach, Brunei has increased its cooperation with Beijing, which can be understood as a political behavior of bandwagoning—deepening its economic engagement through the BRI and refraining from publicly challenging Beijing on South China Sea issues. The paper also considers how perceptions of U.S. strategic unreliability and fear of abandonment have contributed to Brunei's alignment with China. It contends that Brunei's foreign policy reflects a deliberate prioritization of economic security based on its national interests and strategic calculations on its relationship with Washington, resulting in a divergence from other ASEAN states that have adhered more consistently to principles of neutrality or hedging.

This article is structured around four main sections. The first reviews the existing literature on state behavior in the context of great power competition, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia amid the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry. It introduces an emerging trend in the region's strategic calculus—namely, the shift among some ASEAN states from hedging to bandwagoning. The second section turns to the domain of traditional security, with a focus on maritime security, to contextualize Brunei's geopolitical positioning in the South China Sea. This is followed by an analysis of non-traditional security, particularly economic security, arguing that for Brunei, priorities such as financial stability, long-term development, and domestic regime legitimacy have taken precedence over traditional territorial concerns. This prioritization helps explain Brunei's relatively restrained posture in South China Sea disputes—especially when contrasted with the more assertive approach of fellow claimant states like the Philippines. The article then explores Brunei's national development strategy, *Wawasan 2035*, and assesses the extent to which economic cooperation with China has supported these long-term goals—potentially at the expense of asserting maritime claims. With a decade remaining until the plan's

¹ Dylan M. H. Loh, "The 'Chinese Dream' and the 'Belt and Road Initiative': Narratives, practices and sub-state actors," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 21, no. 2 (2021): 167-199, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcz018>.

² James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

³ Richard Javad Heydarian, "Why the Philippines is exiting the Belt and Road," *Asia Times*, November 2, 2023, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/11/why-the-philippines-is-exiting-the-belt-and-road/>.

⁴ David Sacks, "Why Is Italy Withdrawing From China's Belt and Road Initiative?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-italy-withdrawing-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>.

target year, the paper evaluates whether Brunei's continued engagement with China is effectively contributing to its broader socio-economic objectives. To further substantiate this argument, the article also examines Brunei's assessment of U.S. regional commitment. It contends that perceptions of Washington as an unreliable and unsustainable partner, particularly in comparison to Beijing, have influenced Brunei's strategic alignment and deepened its cooperation with China. Ultimately, this study highlights the variation in national security priorities among ASEAN member states, underscoring how Brunei's foreign policy diverges from the region's broader hedging trend. It also underscores the importance of future comparative studies within shared multilateral frameworks—such as ASEAN—to better understand how small and middle powers have demonstrated different political behaviors, when navigating the trade-offs between economic imperatives and territorial sovereignty amid China's expanding economic statecraft. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for key stakeholders, including Bruneian policymakers, ASEAN leaders, and external actors such as China and the United States.

Hedging as a Common Strategy for Southeast Asian Countries

During the Cold War, realist scholars developed two principal theories to explain state alignment behavior in the context of great power rivalry: balancing and bandwagoning. Both concepts are grounded in the balance of power theory, a core tenet of realism. Balancing refers to a state's efforts to counter a perceived threat through either internal measures, such as military build-up and increased defense spending, or external strategies, including the formation of countervailing alliances.⁵ From a realist perspective, particularly that of scholars like John Mearsheimer and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the rise of China presents a fundamental challenge to regional stability.⁶ They famously asserted that "China cannot

rise peacefully," predicting that most of its neighbors, including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam, would likely align with the United States to contain China's growing influence.⁷ In contrast, bandwagoning describes a strategy in which states align with a rising or threatening power, either to avoid confrontation or to benefit from its ascendancy.⁸ It typically involves diplomatic, economic, or military cooperation designed to curry favor with the dominant state, and is often employed by smaller or weaker states seeking to secure their interests without direct confrontation.⁹

The collapse of the Soviet Union produced what Theodore Sorensen termed a "conceptual vacuum," describing the post-Cold War era in which both the identity of the adversary and the definition of "security" became increasingly ambiguous.¹⁰ In the absence of a clear bipolar structure, international relations (IR) scholars, particularly those who study Southeast Asian foreign policy, have moved beyond the classical neorealist dichotomy of balancing and bandwagoning to explore more complex forms of state behavior in an uncertain strategic environment and developed a concept of hedging.

Rather than engaging in overt balancing or bandwagoning, hedging is a strategic response to great power rivalry—what Evelyn Goh describes as "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality."¹¹ In this framework, states seek to cultivate a middle position that delays or avoids choosing one side at the obvious expense of another.¹² Ciorciari and Haacke emphasize that hedging functions primarily as a form of risk management—not to counter immediate threats, but to mitigate long-term political and security risks arising from an uncertain geopolitical landscape.¹³ Building on this, Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2023) introduces the concept of "riskification," through which Southeast Asian governments

⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company: 1979).

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, "Clash of the Titans," *Foreign Policy* 146 (Jan/Feb 2005): 1-6; Paula C. Morrow, *The Theory and Measurement of Work Commitment* (JAI Press, 1993).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, (Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁹ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt32b5fc>; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72-107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539149>.

⁹ David C. Kang, "Between Balancing and Bandwagoning: South Korea's Response to China," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 1-28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23418681>.

¹⁰ Theodore C. Sorensen, "Rethinking National Security," *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 3 (1990): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20044397>.

¹¹ Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies* (Washington: The East-West Center Washington, 2005), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/26086/PS016.pdf>.

¹² Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge*.

¹³ Jürgen Haacke and John D. Ciorciari, *Hedging as Risk Management: Insights from Works on Alignment, Riskification, and Strategy* (Ann Arbor: Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, 2022), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4054791>.

actively assess and rank competing risks.¹⁴ In practice, this often means maintaining strong economic ties with China while simultaneously fostering security cooperation with the United States, thereby avoiding overdependence on any single power. Van Jackson (2016) further contextualizes this behavior as rooted in the region's underlying dynamics of power asymmetry, mistrust, and network complexity. Collectively, these insights suggest that hedging is not a sign of indecision or incoherence, but a deliberate and adaptive strategy.¹⁵ As Kuik and others argue, hedging involves a series of inclusive, forward-looking actions aimed at preserving autonomy and strategic flexibility under systemic uncertainty.¹⁶ It is not merely a midpoint between balancing and bandwagoning, but a calculated attempt to navigate the so-called "impossible triangle" of trade-offs: managing short-term gains, preparing for long-term risks, and preserving fallback options.

Changing Trends: From Hedging to Bandwagoning with China

Southeast Asia is widely recognized for its hedging behavior amid great power rivalry—a tendency rooted in the region's historical commitment to neutrality and non-alignment. These principles, institutionalized by the founding members of ASEAN, have been shaped by the legacies of colonialism and the post-Cold War order, which, as scholars such as Marston argue, have instilled a preference among Southeast Asian states for strategic ambiguity over alignment.¹⁷ However, scholarly interpretations have diverged regarding which Southeast Asian states genuinely engage in hedging and which do not. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that even within ASEAN, individual states can have foreign policies and political decisions based on their national interests and political priorities, while investigating what makes states differ from their common goals and shared interests of neutrality and non-alignment.

Danny Roy defines hedging as a strategy involving "low-level balancing with the United States against China, combined with assurances toward and cooperation with the PRC."¹⁸ He identifies countries such as Singapore and the Philippines as prominent examples of this dual-track approach. In contrast, he views Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia as employing more restrained or subtle forms of balancing that may not rise to the level of full-fledged hedging. Hunter S. Marston offers a different perspective, highlighting cases where hedging has eroded under internal political pressures.¹⁹ His analysis of Cambodia and Myanmar suggests that these states were compelled to abandon hedging in favor of bandwagoning with China—not due to immediate external threats, but rather in response to pressing internal security challenges. His research underscores the importance of domestic political factors in shaping foreign policy alignment, even in a region often associated with strategic ambiguity, while addressing shifts of states' political behaviors even under the same setting of the U.S.-China power rivalry.

Considering how Southeast Asian countries have been studied in the context of hedging, Brunei differs from other Southeast Asian countries who have demonstrated "enduring preference for hedging is the pursuit of sovereignty and security."²⁰ Therefore, building on Marston's argument, I contend that Brunei diverges from other ASEAN countries that have traditionally adhered to neutrality and non-alignment but has shifted its strategic posture from hedging to bandwagoning. However, I highlight that Brunei's turn toward alignment with China is more pronounced than that of Phnom Penh or Yangon examined by Marston. This shift reflects the Sultanate's deliberate reordering of its national priorities—placing economic security above territorial integrity and sidelining its maritime claims in favor of deepening economic ties with Beijing. This distinctive and consequential foreign policy behavior

¹⁴ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Shades of Grey: Riskification and Hedging in the Indo-Pacific." *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 6 (2022), 1181–1214.

¹⁵ Van Jackson, "The Rise and Persistence of Strategic Hedging across Asia: A System-Level Analysis," in *Strategic Asia 2014-2015* (The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2014). <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-rise-and-persistence-of-strategic-hedging-across-asia-a-system-level-analysis/>.

¹⁶ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Explaining Hedging: The Case of Malaysian Equidistance," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 46, no. 1 (2024): 43–76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27301254>; Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 113–157, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30130520>; David Martin Jones and Nicole Jenne, "Hedging and grand strategy in Southeast Asian foreign policy," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 2 (2022): 205–235,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab003>; Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008): 159–185, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41220503>.

¹⁷ Hunter S. Marston, "Abandoning Hedging: Reconsidering Southeast Asian Alignment Choices," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 45, no. 1 (2023): 55–81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27211194>.

¹⁸ Denny Roy, "Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 2 (2005): 305–322, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25798738>.

¹⁹ Marston, "Abandoning Hedging."

²⁰ Bowen Yao, "Historical Origins of Southeast Asian Hedging," *The Pacific Review* (August 2025): 1–29.

is driven by two key factors: first, domestic concerns tied to the pursuit of economic stability and the national development agenda outlined in *Wawasan 2035*; and second, a strategic calculation that views U.S. regional commitments as unreliable and unsustainable, thereby diminishing Washington's role as a viable counterweight to China.²¹

Within this context, a particularly salient feature of the regional landscape is Brunei's emphasis on economic security over maritime sovereignty, a strategic calculus not uniformly adopted by other Southeast Asian claimant states. As previously discussed, the Philippines offers a stark contrast. Manila has deliberately distanced itself from the BRI, arguably due to escalation of tensions with China over maritime disputes in the South China Sea.²² This stands in marked contrast to Brunei's more restrained approach, in which economic cooperation with China has been prioritized over open contestation of maritime claims. The juxtaposition of these two cases highlights the diverse strategic responses among Southeast Asian states to China's regional ascendancy, responses shaped by varying threat perceptions, levels of economic dependence, and geopolitical calculations. The following section examines why maritime security in the South China Sea holds strategic importance for claimant states and provides further context for why Brunei is distinctive in its gradual downplaying of territorial claims in favor of economic engagement with China.

Maritime Security and South China Sea (SCS) Dispute

Traditional security is typically defined by threats to a state's core values, most notably its territorial integrity and political sovereignty.²³ Within this framework, while states generally strive to ensure their traditional security, Southeast Asian countries—particularly those with histories of colonization by imperial powers during the World Wars—have been highlighted by scholars as cases in which “the postcolonial state-building process embedded sovereignty as a core national objective.”²⁴ Against this backdrop, maritime security has

emerged as a critical component of national security for many Southeast Asian states, such as Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, in their efforts to protect territorial integrity. For these countries, safeguarding maritime domains is essential not only for defending national borders but also for securing key economic and strategic interests. Although maritime security became a prominent area of focus in international security relatively recently, gaining conceptual attention primarily in the 1990s, it has since grown in relevance. This increased significance has been driven in part by rising concerns over maritime terrorism and instability in various regions, including the heightened threats observed off the coast of Somalia and elsewhere since the early 2000s.²⁵

Maritime security challenges can arise in a variety of forms, including terrorism, piracy, trafficking of narcotics, people, and illicit goods, arms proliferation, illegal fishing, environmental degradation, and maritime accidents.²⁶ Among these diverse threats, this paper focuses specifically on inter-state tensions, with particular attention to disputes in the South China Sea. The growing strategic interest in maritime zones, especially by emerging powers such as China and India, has elevated the importance of oceans as spaces of geopolitical contestation and security relevance.²⁷

The term “maritime security” remains loosely defined in academic and policy circles, broadly encompassing concepts traditionally associated with naval power, sea control, and interstate rivalry at sea.²⁸ In this context, the South China Sea stands out as one of the most complex and contested maritime regions in the world. Multiple claimants, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei, assert overlapping claims to parts of the sea, often rooted in competing historical narratives and strategic interests.²⁹ China's expansive claims, which encompass nearly the entire South China Sea,

²¹ Yao, “Southeast Asian Hedging.”

²² Asia News International, “Philippines to Exit from China's Belt and Road Initiative,” *Times of India*, November 4, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/philippines-to-exit-from-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/articleshow/104951862.cms>.

²³ Fulvio Attinà, “Traditional Security Issues,” in *China, the European Union, and the International Politics of Global Governance*, ed. Jianwei Wang and Weiqing Son (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁴ Yao, “Southeast Asian Hedging.”

²⁵ “Understanding Maritime Security: History, Practices, and More,” *Executive Protection Blog*, January 13, 2025, <https://executiveprotectionblog.com/2025/01/maritime-security/>.

²⁶ Christian Bueger, “What is Maritime Security?,” *Marine Policy* 53 (March 2015): 159-164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Bueger, “What is Maritime Security?”

²⁹ Chad Anderson, “The South China Sea Dispute and Regional Response,” *Quest Journal of Management and Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2024): 74-86.

have been central to the conflict.³⁰ Its assertive behavior, such as the construction of artificial islands and militarization of disputed areas, has heightened regional tensions and raised broader concerns about the implications for international maritime norms and regional stability.

Such recent developments in the South China Sea have prompted several countries to reassess their strategic relationship with China. As noted earlier, the Philippines has emerged as a prominent example, officially withdrawing from the BRI, leading to speculation that growing tensions with Beijing over maritime disputes might have contributed to this decision. Manila's case stands out compared to the cases of other Southeast Asian countries, considering that the Philippines has become the first Southeast Asian state to completely opt out of the Chinese grand strategy. The protracted tensions between Beijing and Manila have been increasing as marked by the escalation that occurred in May 2025, when a collision between Chinese and Philippine vessels intensified diplomatic friction, with both sides exchanging accusations over responsibility.

While still being a member state of the BRI, Vietnam also presents another illustrative case of assertive behavior in the South China Sea. Since 2021, it has undertaken a series of land reclamation and dredging efforts to expand small- and medium-sized outposts in the Spratly Islands.³¹ While more limited in scale compared to China's artificial island-building activities, these expansions are strategically designed to enhance Vietnam's operational presence and maritime surveillance capabilities. By fortifying these outposts, Vietnam aims to extend the deployment range of its vessels, improve monitoring of distant features, and mitigate the risk of Chinese interference in its offshore oil and gas operations.³² Borton notes that these upgrades include the extension of airstrips, installation of radar systems, and reinforcement of defensive infrastructure—all intended to deter potential threats and bolster Vietnam's sovereignty

claims.³³ This assertive posture reflects what some scholars describe as a deeply rooted sense of national identity and historical resolve, positioning maritime defense as a matter of existential importance rather than mere resource access. In May 2025, following activities by both China and the Philippines around Sandy Cay, an area Vietnam considers part of its territory, Hanoi issued diplomatic protests urging respect for its maritime claims and reiterating its opposition to foreign encroachments in disputed waters.

In parallel, regional and extra-regional powers such as the United States, Japan, and NATO allies have reaffirmed their commitment to upholding freedom of navigation and preserving a rules-based maritime order.³⁴ For instance, the U.S. Department of State publicly expressed support for the Philippines in February 2025, condemning what it described as unsafe conduct by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) near Scarborough Reef.³⁵ In June 2025, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio convened with G7 foreign ministers on the sidelines of the NATO Summit to address growing instability in the South China Sea and to coordinate collective efforts to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.³⁶ In an effort to deepen cooperation aimed at countering China's growing influence in the region, China's Ministry of National Defense issued sharp warnings to Manila. It criticized the Philippines' cooperation with the U.S., particularly the deployment of missile systems and the encouragement of Filipino fishermen to operate in disputed maritime areas, as provocative and destabilizing, warning that such actions amounted to "self-inflicted destruction."³⁷

Brunei's Position as a South China Sea (SCS) Claimant State

In contrast to the assertive responses adopted by the Philippines, Vietnam, and other regional actors, Brunei has pursued a notably restrained approach in the South China Sea. Although it remains one of the

³⁰ Center for Preventive Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

³¹ Harrison Prétat, "The Ripple Effects of Vietnam's Island-Building in the South China Sea," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 31, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ripple-effects-vietnams-island-building-south-china-sea>.

³² Prétat, "Ripple Effects."

³³ James Borton, "Vietnam quiet, firm and resilient in the South China Sea," *Asia Times*, December 9, 2024, <https://asiatimes.com/2024/12/vietnam-quiet-firm-and-resilient-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

³⁴ Anderson, "South China Sea Dispute."

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea," news release, February 19, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-the-philippines-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Rubio's Meeting with G7 Foreign Ministers," news release, June 25, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/06/secretary-rubios-meeting-with-g7-foreign-ministers/>.

³⁷ Liu Zhen, "China wars Philippines against 'self-inflicted destruction' by hosting US missile systems," *South China Morning Post*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3316002/china-warns-philippines-against-self-inflicted-destruction-hosting-us-missile-systems>.

claimant states, Brunei has largely avoided overtly asserting its territorial claims or engaging in confrontational rhetoric. Some scholars have interpreted this subdued stance as a form of strategic disengagement—or even as an effective “abandonment” of its claims in the contested waters.³⁸ This cautious posture has attracted growing academic interest, particularly given Brunei’s aim to diversify its economy and the following sustained involvement in Chinese-led initiatives such as the BRI. The case of Brunei thus prompts broader inquiry into how small states navigate the complex trade-offs between defending territorial sovereignty and preserving economically advantageous relations with major powers, particularly when territorial and economic priorities may conflict.

Brunei, situated on the northwestern coast of Borneo in Southeast Asia, maintains maritime claims that include a 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea, and a continental shelf, some of which overlap with China’s expansive nine-dash line in the South China Sea.³⁹ Among the contested maritime features, Brunei is believed to claim Louisa Reef, although public statements by various government officials have been inconsistent over time.

These maritime assertions are historically rooted in Brunei’s colonial legacy.⁴⁰ Upon gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1984, the Bruneian government published official maps delineating its EEZ and continental shelf claims. A clearer assertion of maritime jurisdiction came in the early 1990s, when a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official publicly affirmed Brunei’s claim to Louisa Reef. Additionally, in a 2009 submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), Brunei sought to extend its continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles, indirectly including features such as Rifleman Bank, though not named explicitly.

While Brunei’s maritime disputes with China remain largely unresolved, its previous tensions with Malaysia over land and maritime boundaries were

formally addressed in 2009 through a diplomatic exchange of letters.⁴¹ As part of the agreement, Brunei conceded certain areas of its EEZ to Malaysia, including rights for Malaysia to develop the Kikeh oil block, an area estimated to hold over 700 million barrels of oil. In exchange, Malaysia acknowledged Brunei’s maritime boundaries and its jurisdictional claim over Louisa Reef. This quiet resolution with Malaysia illustrates Brunei’s preference for non-confrontational, negotiated settlements and reinforces its broader foreign policy approach characterized by low-profile diplomacy and economic pragmatism. This pattern, particularly when contrasted with the more assertive strategies of other South China Sea claimants, provides important context for understanding Brunei’s restrained and cooperative posture in its maritime interactions with China.

Brunei’s overlapping maritime claims in the South China Sea remain a source of tension with Beijing, primarily due to two enduring strategic realities.⁴² First, the region is believed to hold an estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, which are resources that make sovereignty over maritime zones highly contested.⁴³ Second, the South China Sea constitutes one of the world’s busiest maritime trade routes and hosts vital fishing grounds, further intensifying disputes over islands and territorial waters.⁴⁴ Brunei, with 161 kilometers of coastline along the South China Sea, asserts a 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that overlaps with China’s expansive and controversial “nine-dash line.”

Like its approach with Malaysia, Brunei has remained notably reserved in the broader South China Sea discourse, particularly in its dealings with China, since first articulating its maritime claims in the 1980s and reaffirming them in a diplomatic note in 2020. Its consistently low-profile stance has led some analysts to describe Brunei’s claims as “vanishing,” with others suggesting that the country appears indifferent to developments in the disputed waters.⁴⁵ However, such characterizations may oversimplify Brunei’s strategic calculations.

³⁸ Michael Hart, “Brunei Abandons South China Sea Claim for Chinese Finance,” *Geopolitical Monitor*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/brunei-abandons-south-china-sea-claim-for-chinese-finance/>.

³⁹ “Country Profile from the Maritime Awareness Project - Brunei,” The National Bureau of Asian Research, last modified 2025, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/brunei/>.

⁴⁰ “Country Profile.”

⁴¹ “Country Profile.”

⁴² Siu Tzyy Wei, “Caught in the Middle: The Measured Voice of Brunei’s Foreign Policy Amidst the South China Sea Disputes,” *Pacific Forum Young Leaders Blog*, February 29, 2024, <https://pacforum.org/publications/yl-blog-60-caught-in-the-middle-the-measured-voice-of-bruneis-foreign-policy-amidst-the-south-china-sea-disputes/>.

⁴³ Wei, “Caught in the Middle.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Michael Hart, “Brunei Abandons South China Sea Claim for Chinese Finance,” *Geopolitical Monitor*, April 4, 2018,

The prevailing perception of Brunei's muted stance in the South China Sea dispute has prompted varying scholarly interpretations. Some, such as Wei, contend that Brunei's quiet diplomacy should not be mistaken for disengagement or indifference.⁴⁶ Rather, it reflects a strategic and measured response to the escalating competition between the United States and China.⁴⁷ From this perspective, Brunei's foreign and defense posture has been undergoing subtle recalibration. In May 2022, the Bruneian government announced the deployment of a net-centric coastal surveillance system and procured a fleet of U.S.-manufactured drones to support a range of missions, including humanitarian assistance, border security, maritime surveillance, and intelligence operations.⁴⁸ Although detailed assessments of the Royal Brunei Navy's capabilities remain scarce, these developments indicate a significant enhancement of Brunei's maritime security infrastructure, particularly when contrasted with the more limited ambitions outlined in its 2011 Defence White Paper.⁴⁹ This shift suggests a cautious yet deliberate effort to strengthen sovereignty protection while maintaining Brunei's broader strategy of non-confrontational diplomacy.⁵⁰

Wei interprets Brunei's ongoing, low-profile military upgrades, paired with sustained economic cooperation with China, exemplified by the launch of the first Brunei-China Trade and Economy Forum in July 2022, as a strategic maneuver designed to navigate intensifying great-power competition without jeopardizing national priorities.⁵¹ This approach reflects Brunei's consistent reliance on diplomatic caution and selective engagement to manage external pressures. Despite the growing complexity of the South China Sea security landscape, Brunei has so far succeeded in maintaining a delicate equilibrium between the competing interests of Washington and Beijing. This has allowed the sultanate to safeguard its autonomy while advancing its long-term development goals, particularly those articulated in its national vision, *Wawasan 2035*.

As such, scholars have observed that Brunei's capacity to sustain stable relations with both the United States and China, despite the growing strategic rivalry between them, demonstrates a deliberate strategy of compartmentalized engagement, often interpreted through the theoretical lens of hedging.⁵² This approach enables Brunei to engage with each power in distinct domains (security with Washington and economic development with Beijing) without fully aligning with either. On top of Wei, scholars like Hussein, Tumala, and Borua have claimed that Brunei has fostered specific types of relationships with each major power, defense-oriented cooperation with the United States and economic and trade partnerships with China, on the condition that its territorial waters remain undisturbed.⁵³ So far, this strategy appears to have served Brunei's interests well, allowing the country to advance its national priorities and long-term vision without becoming entangled in geopolitical confrontation. As Wei emphasizes, "The friendly stance of the sultanate towards all counterparts is what it can afford in order to maintain its own national interests, while navigating its bilateral and multilateral relationships amidst its maritime concerns."⁵⁴ This diplomatic posture reinforces the notion that Brunei's low-profile, non-confrontational approach is not simply passive, but a deliberate mode of safeguarding sovereignty, promoting development, and preserving autonomy within a contested regional environment.

While much of the existing scholarship characterizes Brunei's approach to the BRI and the South China Sea as a paradigmatic example of hedging, this paper offers an alternative interpretation—arguing that Brunei's behavior is more accurately described as bandwagoning. This alignment with the region's dominant power reflects a deliberate reorientation of national priorities toward economic gain and a strategic effort to mitigate vulnerabilities stemming from perceived U.S. disengagement.⁵⁵ The

<https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/brunei-abandons-south-china-sea-claim-for-chinese-finance/>.

⁴⁶ Wei, "Caught in the Middle."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Rasidah Hj Abu Bakar, "RBAF unveils new drone squadron," *The Scoop*, May 31, 2022, <https://thescoop.co/2022/05/31/rbaf-unveils-new-drone-squadron/>.

⁴⁹ Wei, "Caught in the Middle."

⁵⁰ Wei, "Caught in the Middle."

⁵¹ Wei, "Caught in the Middle."

⁵² Kang, "Between Balancing and Bandwagoning;" Sufrizul Hussein, "Why Brunei is Hedging Between the U.S. and China," *United States Institute of*

Peace, October 26, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/why-brunei-hedging-between-us-and-china>; Kim Tumala, "How Brunei Stays Afloat In An Era of Great Power Rivalry," <https://vanguardthinktank.org/how-brunei-stays-afloat-in-an-era-of-great-power-rivalry>; Nishta Borua, "Brunei: SCS Dispute and Economic Diplomacy with China," *Defense Research and Studies*, September 13, 2024), <https://dras.in/brunei-scs-dispute-and-economic-diplomacy-with-china/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Wei, "Caught in the Middle."

⁵⁵ Kang, "Between Balancing and Bandwagoning."

subsequent sections outline the key arguments supporting this reinterpretation.

Economic Security and Brunei's Trade Diversification Goals

In contrast to the conventional focus on traditional security, centered on state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and external military threats, the concept of non-traditional security has emerged to broaden the analytical scope of security studies. Originating in the mid-1990s, particularly among scholars in Europe and North America, this term of non-traditional security was introduced to better capture a growing array of challenges that do not fit neatly within military or interstate paradigms.⁵⁶ Non-traditional security encompasses a wide range of concerns, including political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions.⁵⁷

Unlike traditional security threats, which are primarily external and often military in origin, non-traditional threats may arise from both external and internal sources, with many originating within the state itself. These include issues such as economic instability, public health crises, environmental degradation, and social unrest, all of which can have profound implications for national resilience and governance.⁵⁸ This broader understanding reflects an evolving security landscape where internal vulnerabilities and transnational challenges increasingly shape the strategic calculations of states, particularly in a highly globalized and interconnected world.

Within the broader framework of non-traditional security, this article focuses specifically on economic security in the realm of international relations, an increasingly salient but often ambiguously defined domain. As the boundaries between economics and national security continue to blur, economic security has come to encompass a wide array of state

interventions aimed at mitigating market failures and safeguarding critical sectors.⁵⁹ As yet, there is no universally accepted definition, though the concept generally refers to a state's capacity to protect its economic foundations from both internal vulnerabilities and external threats.⁶⁰ A significant milestone in the conceptual development of economic security occurred during the G7 Hiroshima Summit in May 2023, where leaders issued a dedicated communiqué on "Economic Resilience and Economic Security."⁶¹ This represented the first coordinated attempt at the international level to clarify the term, which had gained traction across G7 countries despite a lack of shared understanding. The communiqué emphasized a broad spectrum of risks under the umbrella of economic security. These include traditional national security concerns, such as the leakage of sensitive technologies or access to critical resources essential for defense, as well as broader systemic risks like supply chain disruptions, pandemics, and climate change, all of which can undermine economic competitiveness and public welfare.⁶²

In the case of Brunei, a central concern within its economic security agenda is the country's deep dependence on hydrocarbon exports.⁶³ Crude oil and natural gas revenues account for more than half of national GDP, illustrating the structural reliance of the Bruneian economy on the petroleum sector. Despite its small population and geographic size, Brunei ranks among Southeast Asia's wealthiest nations, second only to Singapore in per capita income, predominantly thanks to its substantial natural resource endowments; however, these resources are finite, and their eventual depletion presents a serious long-term challenge. As a result, there is a growing consensus among scholars, analysts, and policymakers on the need for Brunei to pursue proactive economic diversification strategies to enhance resilience and ensure sustainable development in the post-hydrocarbon era.

⁵⁶ David Capie and Paul Evans, "Non-Traditional Security," in *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon (Updated 2nd Edition)* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2007), 173–178, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/asiapacific-security-lexicon-updated-2nd-edition/nontraditional-security/7CBBF76996941CDB6FC53981E5BBD5E5>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Mely Caballero-Anthony, "Understanding Non-traditional Security," in *An Introduction to Non-Traditional Security Studies: A Transnational Approach* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473972308>.

⁵⁹ Matthew P. Goodman, "Getting Economic Security Right," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/getting-economic-security-right>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Emily Benson and Catharine Mouradian, "How Do the United States and Its Partners Approach Economic Security?," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-do-united-states-and-its-partners-approach-economic-security>; Matthew P. Goodman, "G7 Gives First Definition to 'Economic Security,'" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/g7-gives-first-definition-economic-security>.

⁶² Matthew P. Goodman, "Getting Economic Security Right," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/getting-economic-security-right>.

⁶³ Ayman Falak Medina, "Brunei's Economic Diversification Efforts: Moving Beyond Oil and Gas," *ASEAN Briefing*, April 10, 2025, <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/bruneis-economic-diversification-efforts-moving-beyond-oil-and-gas/>.

Lawrence argues that the imperative of securing economic stability holds particular significance for the Bruneian government due to its legitimacy being closely tied to pragmatic, development-oriented policies pursued by the ruling elite.⁶⁴ Brunei's political economy is distinctive in its extensive provision of state welfare, which includes free healthcare, education through university level, subsidized housing and food, substantial direct employment, and generous pension schemes.⁶⁵ Government expenditure constitutes approximately one-third of the country's GDP, with a large majority of the population employed by the civil service or government-linked entities, and citizens are exempt from personal income taxes.⁶⁶ The economy is heavily state-driven, with state-owned enterprises dominating the hydrocarbon sector alongside foreign companies, as well as key industries such as telecommunications, transportation, and energy.⁶⁷ The private sector's viability often depends directly or indirectly on government-led economic activity.⁶⁸ As the sole Southeast Asian nation governed by an absolute monarchy without democratic elections, Brunei's political system is characterized by concentrated power and tightly controlled political participation.⁶⁹ Only a limited number of political parties are permitted, and a significant portion of the population, estimated between 70 and 80 percent, are legally excluded from political engagement due to their employment within state or state-affiliated institutions.⁷⁰ Scholars have observed that securing trade diversification and financial stability extends beyond merely demonstrating economic growth; it underpins the regime's legitimacy, which is primarily based on its ability to achieve sustained development and robust economic performance, thereby making these goals national priorities.⁷¹ Consequently, economic decline poses a critical threat to both the economic security of the state and the ruling elite's authority, especially given the country's reliance on hydrocarbon revenues that are

projected to diminish significantly by 2035.⁷² This context prompts an important inquiry into how the Bruneian government is strategizing to diversify its trade routes and enhance economic resilience amid looming resource limitations, particularly in light of the national development framework – *Wawasan 2035* or Brunei Vision 2035.

***Wawasan 2035* and Brunei in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

In Brunei's unique political system, the Sultan holds consolidated authority, serving not only as the head of state but also occupying key governmental roles such as prime minister, defense minister, finance minister, foreign affairs minister, and religious leader, while overseeing the armed forces and police.⁷³ The government's approach to economic development is guided by a series of five-year National Development Plans, which allocate resources across various sectors to stimulate growth.⁷⁴ The current development strategy aligns closely with the long-term vision outlined in *Wawasan Brunei 2035*, a comprehensive blueprint aimed at securing sustainable progress beyond the country's reliance on hydrocarbons.

In 2007, the monarch of Brunei, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, announced the *Wawasan 2035* as a long-term development plan aimed to reduce the existing overreliance on oil and to promote the sustainable development of the economy, environment and society.⁷⁵ This vision is based on the recognition of the finite nature of oil and gas reserves, emphasizing economic diversification and modernization as critical to Brunei's future stability and prosperity. With the need for economic diversification from hydrocarbon resources, the Sultanate has been attracting foreign investments to develop the non-oil and gas industries, promote market growth, and create employment.⁷⁶ Since 2016, the government has introduced fiscal and structural policy reforms,

⁶⁴ Ithrana Lawrence, "Brunei's Response to China's Belt and Road Initiative: Embracing Asymmetry, Enhancing Authority," *Asian Perspective* 45, no. 2 (2021): 397-420, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2021.0006>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Matthew Prusak, "Brunei's Economy Running on Empty." *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/bruneis-economy-running-on-empty/>.

⁶⁷ Lawrence, "Brunei's Response."

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Lawrence, "Brunei's Response."

⁷⁰ Mohamad Yusop bin Awang Damit, "Negara Brunei Darussalam: Light at the End of the Tunnel," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2002* (ISEAS Publishing, 2002), 81-91, [https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1355/9789812306920-](https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1355/9789812306920-007/html?lang=en&srsltid=AfmBOorsrMDW_gfjs2ETb53lmw3GmB9Crb-IW0CcmalWc9H_WQv8zP8t; Prusak,)

[007/html?lang=en&srsltid=AfmBOorsrMDW_gfjs2ETb53lmw3GmB9Crb-IW0CcmalWc9H_WQv8zP8t; Prusak, "Running on Empty."](https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1355/9789812306920-007/html?lang=en&srsltid=AfmBOorsrMDW_gfjs2ETb53lmw3GmB9Crb-IW0CcmalWc9H_WQv8zP8t; Prusak,)

⁷¹ Ithrana Lawrence, "Brunei's Response;" Falak Medina, "Moving Beyond Oil and Gas."

⁷² Marie-Sybille de Vienne and Jeremy Jammes, "China's Maritime Nexus in Southeast Asia: Economic and Geostrategic Challenges of the Belt and Road Initiative in Brunei," *Asian Survey* 60, no. 5 (2020): 905-927, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48735750>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ de Vienne and Jammes, "China's Maritime Nexus."

⁷⁵ Kailli Zhao and Chang Yau Hoon, "Navigating Brunei-China Economic Connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative: Achievements and Challenges," *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 12, no. 1 (2023), <https://mjcs.newera.edu.my/journal/vol12/iss1/7>.

⁷⁶ Zhao and Hoon, "Brunei-China Economic Connectivity."

including the formation of a Foreign Direct Investment and Downstream Industry Committee to foster a conducive business environment for foreign investment.⁷⁷

Wawasan Brunei 2035 sets ambitious goals for the nation's future as it strives to develop a well-educated and highly skilled workforce that meets global standards. As a main goal of this vision, Brunei aspires to achieve a high quality of life that places it among the world's top ten countries while fostering a robust and sustainable economy with a GDP ranking similarly high on the international stage by 2035.⁷⁸ Central to this vision are various key focus areas, including education, economic development, security, institutional governance, support for local businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs), alongside improvements in infrastructure, social welfare, and government services.⁷⁹ The economic strategy underpinning this vision prioritizes expanding business opportunities and creating employment by attracting both domestic and foreign investment, especially in sectors beyond oil and gas, to drive diversification and long-term resilience.⁸⁰ And as part of its strategy to realize *Wawasan 2035*, the Bruneian government has actively engaged with the Chinese-led BRI, aiming to diversify its economy through enhanced trade and economic cooperation with Beijing.

This context becomes particularly relevant given that the BRI has primarily targeted lower-income and developing countries—especially in Southeast Asia and Africa—through large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, ports, and public facilities. As a result, the BRI has faced criticism as a potential “debt trap,” raising concerns that recipient countries may become financially overextended without resolving underlying structural economic issues. Theoretically, Brunei—an advanced economy and the second-largest in Southeast Asia—does not require external infrastructure financing to the same extent as its neighbors. Therefore, its active participation in the BRI may appear counterintuitive,

particularly given the potential risks of alienating Washington and its traditional partners. *Wawasan 2035*, however, offers crucial context. In aligning Brunei's domestic agenda to achieve economic sustainability—and, by extension, regime legitimacy—the Sultan has chosen to deepen cooperation with Beijing, viewing it as a strategic means to secure internal stability and long-term prosperity.

Brunei's Bandwagoning with China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Even before Brunei formally joined the BRI, its economic ties with China were already well-established. China had consistently ranked among Brunei's top trading partners, and Chinese enterprises had played a growing role in supporting Brunei's infrastructure development.⁸¹ A notable milestone in this evolving relationship was the launch of the Brunei–Guangxi Economic Corridor in 2014, which aimed to strengthen commercial connectivity between Brunei and China's southern Guangxi province.⁸² This initiative not only facilitated Chinese investment into Brunei but also aligned with Beijing's broader ambition to enhance regional connectivity under the BRI framework. Over time, Chinese firms have shown a strong interest in collaborating with Bruneian companies on large-scale infrastructure projects, which serve both China's geopolitical interests and Brunei's domestic development goals.⁸³ Supported by bilateral facilitation mechanisms, Chinese investment in Brunei intensified throughout the 2010s, reaching a peak around 2016.⁸⁴ Today, China remains one of Brunei's most economically influential partners, reflecting a deepening commercial presence that continues to shape the Sultanate's development trajectory.⁸⁵

High-level diplomatic exchanges between Brunei and China in 2017 and 2018 significantly advanced their bilateral relationship. During these state visits, the two countries signed a Memorandum of

⁷⁷ Asiyah Az-Zahra Ahmad Kumpoh and Chang Yau Hoon, “Brunei in Historical Context: Governance, Geopolitics, and Socio-economic Development,” in *Stability, Growth and Sustainability*, (ISEAS Publishing: 2023), 26-48, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1355/9789815011692-006>.

⁷⁸ Brunei Ministry of Finance and Economy, *Wawasan Brunei 2035*, <https://deps.mofe.gov.bn/DEPD%20Documents%20Library/NDP/Wawasan/04%20-%20WAWASAN.pdf>.

⁷⁹ Andrew Jeffreys, “The Report: Brunei Darussalam 2011,” Oxford Business Group, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/event/speech-given-by-andrew-jeffreys-at-the-report-brunei-2011-launch/>.

⁸⁰ Brunei Ministry of Finance and Economy, *Wawasan Brunei 2035*.

⁸¹ “Understanding the Belt & Road Initiative and its impact in Brunei,” *Commercial Dispute Resolution*, May 5, 2024, <https://www.cdr-news.com/cdr-essential-intelligence/belt-and-road-initiative/brunei/>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Zhao and Hoon, “Navigating Brunei-China Economic Connectivity.”

⁸⁵ Mahani Hamdan and Chang Yau Hoon, “Brunei Darussalam: Making Strides with a Renewed Focus on the Future,” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019* (ISEAS Publishing, 2019), pp. 85-102, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1355/9789814843164-008>.

Understanding (MOU) on BRI development and jointly outlined a Belt and Road Cooperation Plan.⁸⁶ These agreements elevated the bilateral relationship to a Strategic Partnership of Cooperation, signaling a formal commitment to deeper economic collaboration within the BRI framework.⁸⁷ This diplomatic upgrade also provided a strong institutional foundation for the intensification of trade and investment flows between the two countries. At the 2019 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, Brunei's Sultan further affirmed the Sultanate's support for the initiative, expressing a clear willingness to align the BRI with *Wawasan 2035*.⁸⁸ This public endorsement not only reinforced Brunei's economic alignment with China, but also demonstrated how the BRI has been positioned as a complementary vehicle for achieving Brunei's long-term strategic and economic goals.

Wawasan 2035 outlines thirteen specific strategies, with infrastructure development standing out as a central focus.⁸⁹ The clear synergy between Brunei's long-term objectives and the goals of the BRI highlights the deliberate integration of Chinese-led economic initiatives into Brunei's domestic policy framework.⁹⁰ Notably, among other agendas, two particular strategies within *Wawasan 2035* align closely with the BRI's aims, illustrating how Brunei leverages this partnership to advance its vision for sustained prosperity and macroeconomic stability. Below are two strategies outlined in Brunei's *Wawasan 2035* projects that directly align with the goals of China's BRI:⁹¹

- A local business development strategy that will increase chances for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in the area and provide Bruneian Malays the chance to become industry leaders by enhancing their level of competitiveness.
- A plan for building and sustaining top-notch infrastructure that would guarantee ongoing government spending and public-private sector collaboration, with a focus on the sectors of industry, education, and health.

It is clear that Brunei views the initiative as a key catalyst for accelerating its economic diversification, aligning closely with the goals outlined in its national development plan.⁹² This strategic outlook has propelled Brunei into becoming an active proponent of the BRI.⁹³ A prime example of this growing partnership is the large-scale petrochemical joint venture at Pulau Muara Besar (PMB), which stands as a flagship project within the Brunei-Guangxi Economic Corridor. Since 2018, this industrial complex, with its deep-water port in Muara, has been operated by Hengyi Industries, a subsidiary of China's Zhejiang Hengyi Group, in collaboration with Damai Holdings, owned by the Bruneian government.

The PMB project symbolizes China's expanding economic footprint in Brunei and plays a vital role in the country's efforts to transition from an economy reliant on fossil fuel exports toward one focused on higher value-added industrial production.⁹⁴ Covering 955 hectares, the PMB Industrial Park houses some of the region's most advanced oil refining and petrochemical facilities.⁹⁵ With an anticipated total investment of USD 15.5 billion, split between USD 3.5 billion for the initial phase and USD 12 billion for the second phase, this initiative has already made a substantial contribution, adding approximately USD 1.33 billion to Brunei's GDP in 2020 alone.⁹⁶

More than just an economic boost, the PMB project exemplifies how BRI-linked investments support Brunei's broader strategic goals of attracting foreign direct investment and integrating into global value chains. Simultaneously, it provides China with a strategic foothold in Southeast Asia's energy and industrial sectors. The scale and prominence of the PMB venture reflect the deepening economic interdependence between Brunei and China, which, in turn, helps explain Brunei's careful and non-confrontational approach to its relationship with Beijing.

Another cornerstone of Brunei-China cooperation under the BRI is the Temburong Bridge project,

⁸⁶ Zhao and Hoon, "Navigating Brunei-China Economic Connectivity."

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ain Bandial, "China to prioritise development projects with Brunei, says Xi," *The Scoop*, April 27, 2019, <https://thescoop.co/2019/04/27/china-to-prioritise-development-projects-with-brunei-says-xi/>.

⁸⁹ "Understanding the Belt & Road Initiative."

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Embassy of Brunei Darussalam, "Brunei Vision 2035 - Wawasan 2035," press release, <http://www.bruneiembassy.org/brunei-vision-2035.html>.

⁹² Sebastien Goulard, "China's BRI in some ASEAN countries (3/4): Wawasan Brunei 2035," *One Belt One Road Europe*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.oboreurope.com/en/chinas-bri-asean-brunei/>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ "Understanding the Belt & Road Initiative."

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

which exemplifies both the scale and strategic intent of their bilateral partnership.⁹⁷ Completed in 2020 with a USD 1.2 billion investment from the Bruneian government, the 30-kilometre structure, currently the longest bridge in Southeast Asia, was constructed through a collaboration between the China State Construction Engineering Corporation and South Korea's Daelim Industrial.⁹⁸ Beyond serving as a critical piece of transportation infrastructure connecting Bandar Seri Begawan to the geographically separated Temburong District, the bridge symbolizes China's growing role in Brunei's infrastructure landscape and highlights the technological capacity of Chinese state-owned enterprises.

While the immediate benefits of the project lie in enhanced domestic connectivity, improved mobility, and regional economic stimulation, its broader implications are geopolitical. The bridge reinforces China's economic presence and soft power in Brunei, positioning infrastructure development as a tool of influence. In this context, Brunei's engagement with Chinese-led infrastructure initiatives underscores its increasing economic reliance on Beijing for diversification and development, while also reflecting a measured diplomatic approach aimed at strengthening bilateral ties. As Xinhua News noted, the bridge was the product of "joint efforts of hundreds of workers, contractors, and suppliers," further emphasizing the scale and collaborative nature of the project.⁹⁹

Despite the visible successes of Brunei–China cooperation under the BRI, several ongoing challenges complicate the deepening of bilateral ties.¹⁰⁰ Zhao and Hoon discuss the ongoing challenges of the bilateral cooperation, including a deficient publicity of the BRI, lackadaisical progress of some projects, and labour controversies surrounding the Chinese FDIs in Brunei.¹⁰¹ Perhaps most key is the limited public awareness and deficient publicity of the BRI within Brunei.¹⁰² There remains a lack of coherent government communication and public engagement around BRI-related projects, contributing to ambiguity among

local stakeholders regarding the initiative's objectives and benefits. This information gap has, in some cases, fueled skepticism about China's long-term intentions and the true beneficiaries of these projects.

Moreover, the uneven progress of certain infrastructure developments, with some projects experiencing delays or underperformance, has raised concerns about the sustainability and efficacy of Chinese investments.¹⁰³ These delays are often attributed to coordination inefficiencies, bureaucratic inertia, or mismatches between Chinese implementation models and Brunei's regulatory environment. Additionally, the presence of labour-related controversies surrounding Chinese FDI has triggered social tensions.¹⁰⁴ Reports of poor working conditions, minimal integration of local labour, and disputes over employment practices at Chinese-operated sites point to a misalignment between the economic goals of BRI investors and Brunei's social and labour policy priorities. These issues, if unaddressed, risk undermining the local legitimacy of BRI projects and complicating future bilateral cooperation.

Notably, despite repeated warnings from scholars and policymakers, the Bruneian government continues to deepen its engagement with the BRI, expanding both economic and political cooperation with Beijing. A growing body of scholarship suggests that Brunei's active participation in the initiative reflects the government's strategic pursuit of economic and political objectives, most notably, trade diversification. This prioritization is often linked to Brunei's muted stance on the South China Sea dispute, despite being one of the claimant states. By downplaying its territorial claims, Brunei appears to be recalibrating its foreign policy in favor of maintaining stable economic ties with China. And such a transition in foreign policy priorities – from traditional security to economic security – has contributed to the Sultanate's political behaviors in the great power competition – from hedging between the United States and China to bandwagoning with Beijing.

⁹⁷ "Understanding the Belt & Road Initiative."

⁹⁸ "Understanding the Belt & Road Initiative."

⁹⁹ "Brunei's Temburong bridge project benefits local contractors, workers," *Xinhua News*, March 21, 2025, <https://english.news.cn/20250321/a078552968b94ce1b42ac133855c4448/c.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ Hamdan and Hoon, "Brunei Darussalam: Making Strides."

¹⁰¹ Zhao and Hoon, "Navigating Brunei-China Economic Connectivity."

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Zhao and Hoon, "Navigating Brunei-China Economic Connectivity."

¹⁰⁴ Zhao and Hoon, "Navigating Brunei-China Economic Connectivity;" Chang-Yau Hoon and Kaili Zhao, "Mainland Chinese Workers in Brunei Darussalam: Living in a Bubble," *Fulcrum*, October 23, 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/mainland-chinese-workers-in-brunei-darussalam-living-in-a-bubble/>.

Unreliable and Unsustainable Washington

Another key factor to consider is Brunei's perception of the United States as a reliable and enduring partner. In great power competition, states often pursue hedging strategies to engage both sides—seeking to maximize strategic and economic benefits while minimizing risks by avoiding full alignment with either power. In the context of the U.S.–China rivalry, this typically involves relying on Washington for security guarantees while pursuing economic cooperation with Beijing. However, hedging depends on the expectation that both powers can and will deliver on these respective fronts. When such expectations diminish—particularly if one power is perceived as unable or unwilling to meet a state's strategic needs—the incentive to hedge weakens. In Brunei's case, doubts about U.S. long-term commitment in the region have contributed to its decision to shift away from hedging and toward bandwagoning with China, seeking to secure tangible economic benefits and demonstrate alignment with a more consistently engaged partner. In doing so, Brunei has signaled a deeper level of commitment—if not outright loyalty—to Beijing.

Building on this analysis, it is evident that strategic variation among ASEAN claimant states is primarily shaped by each country's assessment of its reliance on—and alignment with—both China and the United States. In particular, the depth and nature of their relationships with Washington significantly influence how they navigate the trade-offs between economic cooperation with China and the defense of territorial sovereignty. For instance, the Philippines has significantly expanded its military and economic engagement with Washington as part of a broader strategy to counter China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Although China remains the Philippines' largest trading partner and trade flows have remained stable, Manila's economic orientation

has become increasingly shaped by political and strategic considerations.¹⁰⁵ Manila's longstanding security alliance with Washington, alongside delays in Chinese-funded infrastructure projects and persistent maritime tensions, has prompted efforts to diversify economically away from China.¹⁰⁶ Security cooperation with Washington has deepened through regular joint military exercises and high-level defense dialogues. The recently released "Joint Vision Statement on U.S.–Philippine Defense Industrial Cooperation" underscores this strategic alignment, reaffirming a shared commitment to maintaining close defense ties and enhancing interoperability in support of a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, Brunei also has actively engaged with Washington. Brunei participated in the U.S.–ASEAN Special Summit, held for the first time at the White House on May 12, 2022.¹⁰⁸ This high-level engagement reflected Brunei's continued support for multilateralism and its strategic alignment with U.S. regional objectives. Moreover, Prince Mateen undertook a follow-up visit to the U.S. West Coast from March 5–14, 2023, where he engaged directly with U.S. Naval Special Warfare Units and Special Forces Groups.¹⁰⁹ He participated in elite training activities, including a flight with TOPGUN pilots, signaling defense interoperability and trust-building between the two nations.¹¹⁰ Moreover, U.S. Army Lieutenant General Joshua M. Rudd, Deputy Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, visited Brunei from January 22–24 during the onset of the second Trump administration.¹¹¹ His visit focused on strengthening bilateral defense relations through enhanced people-to-people ties and increased military engagement.¹¹²

Many scholars contend that recent developments underscore Brunei's growing strategic relevance within the broader U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.¹¹³ They

¹⁰⁵ William Alan Reinsch and Reena Samuel, "Rocking the Boat: The Philippines Trade Strategy Amid Rising Geoeconomic Tensions," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rocking-boat-philippines-trade-strategy-amid-rising-geoeconomic-tensions>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Vision Statement on U.S.–Philippine Defense Industrial Cooperation*, vision statement, March 28, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Mar/28/2003677420/-1/-1/1/JOINT-VISION-STATEMENT-ON-U.S.-PHILIPPINE-DEFENSE-INDUSTRIAL-COOPERATION.PDF>; U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Security Cooperation with the Philippines*, fact sheet, January 20, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-philippines/>.

¹⁰⁸ The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, *U.S. Relations With Brunei*, fact sheet, August 15, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-brunei/>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, *U.S. Relations With Brunei*; U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "USINDOPACOM Deputy Commander Travels to Brunei," press release, January 28, 2025, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/NEWS/News-Article-View/Article/4045356/usindopacom-deputy-commander-travels-to-brunei/>.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Sufrizul Husseini, "Why Brunei is Hedging.," Kim Tumala, "How Brunei Stays Afloat in an Era of Great Power Rivalry," *Vanguard Think Tank*, <https://vanguardthinktank.org/how-brunei-stays-afloat-in-an-era-of-great-power-rivalry>.

interpret Brunei's defense cooperation with the United States as part of a broader hedging strategy — one that allows the small monarchy to maintain security ties with Washington while deepening economic engagement with China. These analyses highlight Brunei's nuanced diplomatic posture: carefully balancing relations with both major powers while quietly expanding security cooperation with the United States amid rising regional tensions and intensifying great-power rivalry. From this perspective, the sustained military partnership reflects a mutual interest in promoting regional stability and maritime security within the shifting geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia.

However, this level of security cooperation does not suffice to qualify as a hedging strategy between China and the United States. Unlike the Philippines, Brunei does not view the United States as a consistently reliable or sustainable partner capable of effectively counterbalancing China's regional influence. While U.S.-Philippine security cooperation has deepened significantly in recent years, Brunei's partnership with the United States has not developed at a comparable pace. This contrast becomes more apparent when comparing the relatively limited growth of defense cooperation between Brunei and Washington with the deepening economic engagement between Brunei and Beijing.

Particularly, the Trump administration, both the first and second terms, represents a critical inflection point in understanding Brunei's increasingly cautious posture toward the United States. President Donald Trump's well-documented skepticism toward multilateralism and traditional alliances has significantly undermined perceptions of U.S.

reliability among both allies and strategic partners.¹¹⁴ Long regarded as the unipolar leader in the post-Cold War liberal order, the United States under Trump adopted a transactional and inward-looking foreign policy framework, encapsulated in the slogan "Make America Great Again."¹¹⁵ This shift raised alarm across the international community, particularly in smaller states such as Brunei, which rely heavily on stable external partnerships for both security and economic assurances. Trump's demands for increased defense burden-sharing from allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific have further exacerbated concerns about Washington's long-term commitment to regional security, prompting fears of strategic abandonment.¹¹⁶

Compounding this uncertainty is the administration's erratic trade policy. Trump's emphasis on tariffs—referred to as "the most beautiful word in the dictionary"—have damaged perceptions of the U.S. as a predictable economic partner.¹¹⁷ Brunei, though less affected than some of its Southeast Asian neighbors, has not been immune.¹¹⁸ The imposition of a 25 percent tariff on Bruneian exports to the United States signaled a troubling shift in economic relations. While the economic impact was relatively muted compared to countries like Laos or Myanmar, where tariff rates reached up to 40 percent, Brunei's reliance on economic growth and diversification—particularly in line with its *Wawasan* 2035 development goals—means that any disruption to trade with major powers can have disproportionate strategic consequences.¹¹⁹ These developments have contributed to Brunei's growing alignment with China, which presents itself as a more stable and

¹¹⁴ "Asian Allies Fear Being Dumped by Trump," *The Economist*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/03/06/asian-allies-fear-being-dumped-by-trump>; Giuseppe Spatafora, "The Trump card: What could US abandonment of Europe look like?," *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, February 17, 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/trump-card-what-could-us-abandonment-europe-look>.

¹¹⁵ Max Bergmann, "How America Blew Its Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Policy*, May 26, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/26/how-america-blew-its-unipolar-moment/>; Dennis Ross, "Here's Why the U.S. Is No Longer the World's Only Superpower," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 4, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/heres-why-us-no-longer-worlds-only-superpower>.

¹¹⁶ Erin D. Dumbacher, Michael C. Horowitz, and Lauren Kahn, "Will Trump's 'Big Beautiful' Defense Spending Last?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 9, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/will-trumps-big-beautiful-defense-spending-last>; Paul McLeary, Chris Lunday, and Esther Webber, "Trump wants NATO to spend more on defense. Here's who is actually paying," *Politico*, June 22, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/22/trump-nato-defense-spending-winners-losers-00409979>; Eun-joong Kim and Seo-young Kim, "U.S. urges S.

Korea, Asian allies to raise defense spending to 5% of GDP," *The Chosun*, June 20, 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/06/20/LDZQFQZREZCBVN5WYCLE3FYIZE/>.

¹¹⁷ James A. Dorn, "Freedom, Not Tariff, Is the Most Beautiful Word in the Dictionary," *Cato Institute*, March 10, 2025, <https://www.cato.org/blog/freedom-not-tariff-most-beautiful-word-dictionary>.

¹¹⁸ Carla Teng-Westergaard, "How Southeast Asia Negotiated Lower US Tariffs," *Asia Media Center*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/otr-how-southeast-asia-negotiated-lower-us-tariffs>; Fan Wang, "Trump tariffs on Asia: Which economies were hit hardest?," *BBC News*, August 1, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c04r711q53z0>; Maria Siow, "How Southeast Asia haggled with erratic US economic might," *South China Morning Post*, August 10, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3321264/how-southeast-asia-haggled-erratic-us-economic-might>.

¹¹⁹ Exec. Order No. 14326, 90 Fed. Reg. 37963 (July 31, 2025), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/08/06/2025-15010/further-modifying-the-reciprocal-tariff-rates>.

economically beneficial partner in contrast to an increasingly unpredictable Washington.¹²⁰

As a result, Brunei has prioritized economic security over defense alignment, regarding deeper economic engagement with Beijing as a more viable and beneficial long-term strategy. From this perspective, China is seen not only as a dominant economic power but also as a more stable and predictable partner, particularly in areas such as infrastructure investment and trade, which aligns with Brunei's national development goals under *Wawasan 2035*. This perception has shaped Brunei's diplomatic and development strategies, leading it to favor economic cooperation with China over strategic confrontation and thus, engage in bandwagoning. In essence, Brunei considers its economic relationship with China more dependable and advantageous than any prospective military partnership with the United States.

Conclusion

During their most recent meeting in Beijing, President Xi and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah emphasized the value of maintaining ongoing dialogue and constructive engagement between China and ASEAN, framing such efforts as essential to ensuring peace and stability in the South China Sea.¹²¹ Notably, both leaders avoided directly addressing any bilateral differences on the matter. A similar tone was adopted during Vice-President Han Zheng's visit to Brunei in November 2024, where official discussions with Sultan Bolkiah continued to reflect a conciliatory approach.¹²² China appears to have leveraged the more reserved stance of certain ASEAN members, including Brunei, to reinforce its narrative on the South China Sea. For instance, following his visits to Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos in April 2016, just prior to the arbitral tribunal ruling, then-Foreign Minister Wang Yi publicly asserted that a four-point consensus had been reached with these nations, thereby signaling alignment with China's position.¹²³

Given the growing importance of Brunei–China economic cooperation and political engagement, this paper has examined Brunei Darussalam's unique diplomatic stance in regional affairs. It focuses on the Sultanate's pragmatic approach to the South China Sea dispute and its active participation in China's BRI, highlighting a clear preference for economic security over territorial assertiveness. While many states, such as the Philippines, have adopted more confrontational or cautious stances toward China due to sovereignty concerns, employing hedging strategies in the U.S.-China's great power competition, Brunei has chosen to increase its cooperation with China with a low-profile, pragmatic strategy rooted in economic necessity, long-term developmental goals deeply related to its regime stability, and strategic reconsiderations of its relationship with Washington.

At the heart of Brunei's China policy is *Wawasan 2035*, a national vision that seeks to transition the economy away from hydrocarbon dependency toward diversification and sustainable growth. In pursuit of this, the government has strategically aligned itself with China's BRI, leveraging infrastructure investment and industrial partnerships, such as the Temburong Bridge and Pulau Muara Besar projects, despite overlapping maritime claims with Beijing in the South China Sea. Rather than framing China as a strategic threat, Brunei has pursued a quiet diplomacy that minimizes public confrontation and instead emphasizes economic cooperation.

This paper argues that existing literature, which characterizes Brunei's foreign policy as a form of hedging, does not accurately reflect the realities of Brunei's strategic posture. While hedging implies a degree of strategic ambiguity or dual alignment, Brunei's foreign policy suggests a clearer alignment with China, particularly given its limited and largely symbolic engagement with the United States in security affairs. Rather than positioning itself between two great powers, Brunei has pursued a path more accurately described as bandwagoning, i.e., aligning closely with China in pursuit of economic development and regime stability. This

¹²⁰ Tamir Hayman, "Unpredictable, Forceful, and Disruptive: The Trump Effect in the Middle East," *The Institute for National Security Studies*, March 5, 2025, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/trumpism/>.

¹²¹ "China-Brunei joint statement on advancing strategic cooperative partnership," *Xinhua News*, February 6, 2025, <https://english.news.cn/20250206/ee6169b404fd420588a66c58970c985f/c.html>.

¹²² Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Negara Brunei Darussalam, "韩正访问文莱," [Han Zheng's Visit to Brunei] (October 23, 2024), http://bn.china-embassy.gov.cn/zwgxs/202410/t20241023_11513436.htm.

¹²³ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines, "Wang Yi Talks about China's Four-Point Consensus on South China Sea Issue with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos," news release, April 23, 2016, http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/chinew/201604/t20160426_1160193.htm.

strategy reflects Brunei's long-term national priorities and strategic assessment of its relationship with Washington, leading to a calculated decision to deepen ties with Beijing—perceived as a more consistent, capable, and beneficial partner for advancing its domestic agenda.

Based on this analysis, I would like to make some policy recommendations for Brunei's policy makers and foreign officers of Brunei, other ASEAN states, Chinese and U.S. politicians. First, for Brunei's policymakers, Brunei's strategy of economic engagement with China has brought substantial development gains, but it also carries potential long-term dependencies and political sensitivities. The government should continue to pursue what I would like to call *diversification within diversification*, such as broadening foreign investment partners beyond China, improving transparency in joint ventures, and fostering domestic capacity-building to avoid over-reliance on any single external actor, to reduce its economic reliance on China.

For ASEAN member states and other regional powers, Brunei's approach highlights the importance of recognizing the diversity of strategic preferences among South China Sea claimant states. Unlike more vocal or confrontational actors, Brunei has opted for low-profile diplomacy and a strong emphasis on economic engagement, demonstrating that not all states prioritize territorial defense over economic development. ASEAN-led initiatives should therefore avoid applying uniform expectations to member states and instead accommodate the varied political, economic, and strategic contexts shaping their foreign policy choices. Brunei's case presents a valuable alternative model for managing great power competition through economic pragmatism rather than overt alignment or resistance. This diversity also presents an important opportunity for scholars and policymakers to move beyond binary frameworks of alignment and to appreciate the multiplicity of strategies available to small and middle powers. Understanding these differences not only contributes to more effective regional diplomacy but also underscores the agency of smaller states in navigating the complex dynamics of U.S.–China rivalry.

For China, Brunei represents a strategically important partner in Southeast Asia where BRI projects can foster mutually beneficial development outcomes. To sustain and expand its influence,

Chinese actors must proactively address local concerns related to labor conditions, project transparency, and environmental sustainability. Strengthening soft-power initiatives and public diplomacy efforts in Brunei by engaging civil society and effectively communicating the tangible benefits of cooperation will be essential in maintaining positive perceptions of the BRI over the long term and ensuring continued goodwill from both the government and the public.

For the United States and other external partners, Brunei's limited defense cooperation with Washington and its renewed priority towards economic goals suggest that traditional, security-focused engagement may have limited effectiveness. Instead, these actors should concentrate on targeted economic and developmental partnerships—including technical assistance, educational and cultural exchanges, and support for alternative infrastructure financing. By providing credible and attractive alternatives to Chinese investment, the U.S. and its partners can help broaden Brunei's external economic relationships, thereby reducing its dependence on Beijing and enhancing its strategic autonomy. Moreover, this approach offers a timely opportunity for policymakers in Washington to reconsider their broader Indo-Pacific strategy, especially as the region experiences increasing Chinese influence, an outcome that U.S. strategy aims to counterbalance. Adopting a more nuanced, multifaceted engagement framework in smaller states like Brunei could strengthen the U.S. position in the region without provoking unnecessary tensions.

Brunei's conduct in the South China Sea and its proactive participation in the BRI should not be interpreted as signs of passivity or weakness. Instead, they exemplify a carefully calibrated foreign policy rooted in economic pragmatism, diplomatic restraint, and the pursuit of regime stability. While often overlooked in regional analyses, Brunei provides a valuable case study of how small states manage great-power competition, not through overt confrontation or strict alignment, but through selective engagement and strategic discretion. A deeper understanding of Brunei's approach enriches the broader discourse on Southeast Asian diplomacy and sheds important light on how evolving national priorities, particularly the shifting balance between traditional and non-traditional security concerns, are

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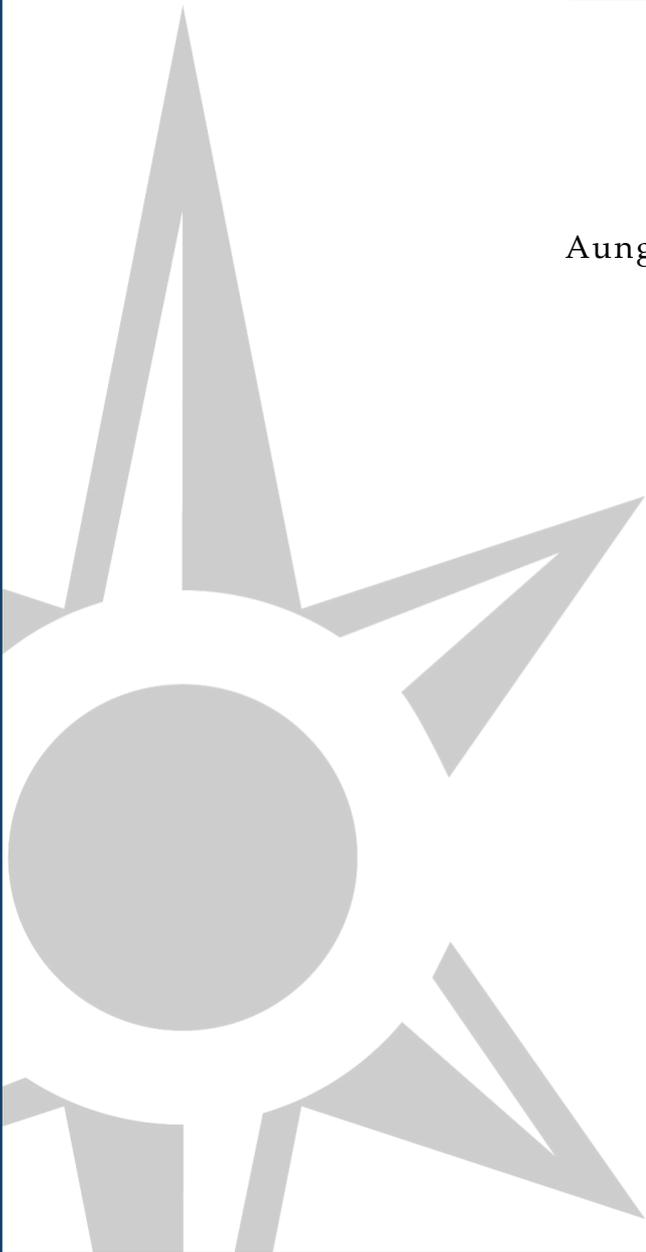
reshaping the state's foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

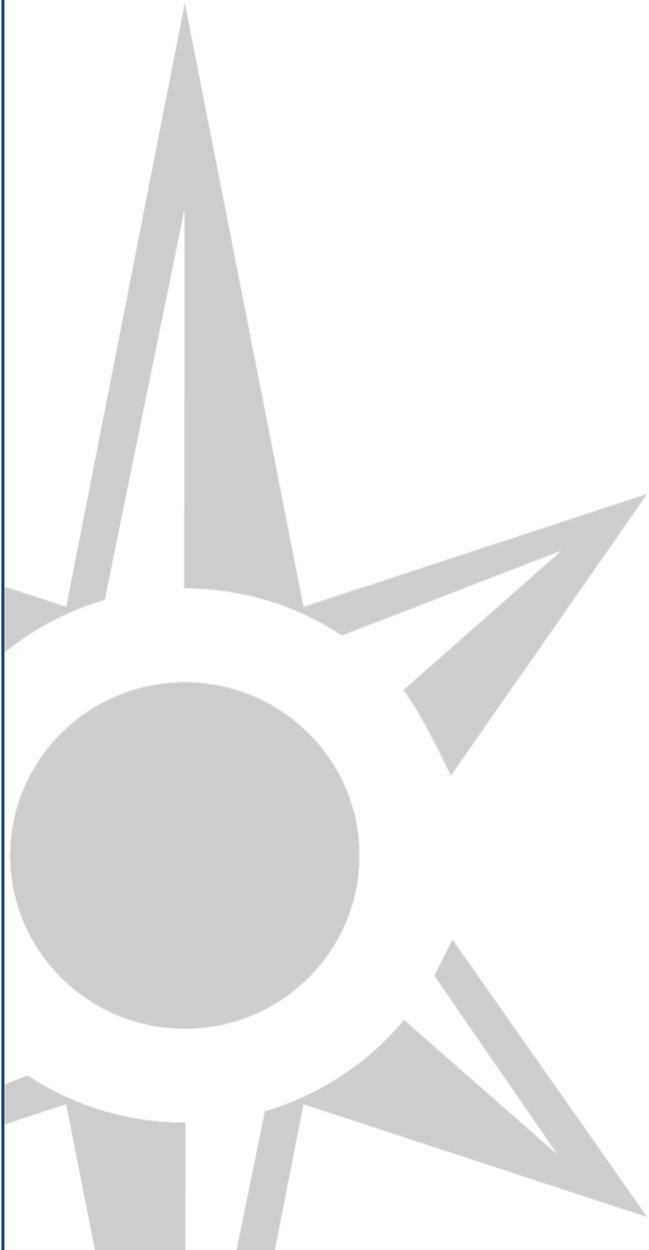
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHEEWON MIN (minsheewon@naver.com / kell8284@oxford.ac.uk) holds a Master's degree in Asian Studies from Georgetown University and is an incoming DPhil candidate in International Relations at the University of Oxford. Her research explores political behaviors of small and middle powers in the great power competition with a particular focus on international organizations and multilateralism.

ASEAN's Myanmar Dilemma: Institutional Paralysis in Regional Diplomacy

By
Aung Thura Ko Ko





Executive Summary

Aung Thura Ko Ko

The February 2021 military coup in Myanmar has presented the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with one of the most severe political and diplomatic crises in its history, testing the bloc's capacity to uphold regional stability, human rights, and its own stated norms. This paper critically examines ASEAN's response over the four years since the coup, focusing on the interplay between structural constraints within the ASEAN Charter, the bloc's consensus-based decision-making process, and the divergent foreign policy positions of its member states. It evaluates the performance and limitations of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) framework, ASEAN's central diplomatic instrument for addressing the Myanmar crisis, and analyzes how internal divisions have undermined its implementation. With the first phase of junta-orchestrated elections held on 28 December, this paper pays particular attention to ASEAN's collective and individual member responses to that process and to the second and third phases scheduled for 11 and 25 January respectively, assessing both the strategic calculations behind the bloc's public stance and the implications for regional legitimacy and stability. The analysis situates ASEAN's Myanmar dilemma within broader debates on regional governance, sovereignty norms, and the effectiveness of multilateral crisis diplomacy. The paper concludes with a set of pragmatic, actionable recommendations aimed at reforming ASEAN's institutional capacity for rapid crisis response, strengthening its ability to address unconstitutional seizures of power, and restoring its credibility as the central driver of peace and security in Southeast Asia.

Introduction

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military staged a coup d'état, detaining State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, overturning the results of the November 2020 general election.¹ This illegitimate coup provoked an immediate wave of nationwide protests, mass civil disobedience, and, eventually, armed resistance as various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and newly formed People's Defence Forces (PDFs) joined the struggle against the junta.² The situation rapidly escalated into a multi-front civil war, compounded by a humanitarian catastrophe, with millions displaced and widespread food insecurity.³

ASEAN, which had long portrayed itself as a cornerstone of regional stability and conflict management, was confronted with one of the gravest political crises in its history. However, the bloc's initial and subsequent responses exposed deep-seated institutional limitations, particularly its strict adherence to the non-interference principle enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and its reliance on consensus-based decision-making.⁴ These norms, historically credited with preserving unity among politically diverse members, proved ill-suited to address an internal political crisis of this magnitude especially when member states themselves were divided over whether, and how, to pressure the junta and engage with the opposition National Unity Government (NUG).

The Myanmar crisis has highlighted a fundamental contradiction within ASEAN's identity: it aspires to be a driver of peace and regional order, yet its mechanisms are designed to avoid direct involvement in what it defines as "internal affairs." This tension has created a form of diplomatic paralysis, wherein the bloc's highest-level interventions such as the adoption of the Five-Point

Consensus in April 2021 have been undermined by weak enforcement, rotating chairmanship priorities, and divergent member-state agendas.⁵

The stakes are not limited to Myanmar's domestic future. The country's ongoing instability has transborder implications fueling refugee flows into Thailand, exacerbating illicit arms and narcotics trafficking, and creating opportunities for external powers to exploit ASEAN's disunity.⁶ In this sense, ASEAN's handling of Myanmar has become a litmus test of its credibility in managing regional security challenges more broadly. The bloc's reaction to the junta's staged 2025–26 elections whose first phase took place on 28 December 2025 in just 102 of the country's 330 townships and has been widely condemned by governments, the United Nations and rights groups as neither free nor fair has further intensified this test, as member states now debate whether to maintain the exclusion of the junta from high-level meetings or move toward its gradual reintegration.⁷

This paper seeks to answer the central research question: **Why has ASEAN's response to Myanmar's post-2021 coup crisis remained ineffective?** It addresses this by:

- Examining structural constraints in ASEAN's institutional framework that limit its crisis-response capacity.
- Analyzing divergent member-state positions and their impact on collective diplomacy.
- Evaluating the Five-Point Consensus both as a diplomatic instrument and as a political signal.
- Assessing ASEAN's collective and individual reactions to the Junta's December 2025 election polls.

¹ BBC News, "Myanmar coup: Aung San Suu Kyi detained as military seizes control," Feb. 1, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55902070>.

² International Crisis Group, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup* (Crisis Group Asia Report No. 324, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b166-responding-myanmar-coup>.

³ UNHCR, "Myanmar Emergency," accessed August 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/emergencies/myanmar-emergency>.

⁴ ASEAN Charter, Article 2, "Principles," ASEAN Secretariat, 2007, <https://asean.org/asean/charter>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "ASEAN's Failed Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar," April 22, 2022,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/22/myanmar-aseans-failed-5-point-consensus-year>.

⁶ The Guardian, "China's deadly divide-and-rule tactics in Myanmar risk shock waves across the region," August 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/25/chinas-deadly-divide-and-rule-tactics-in-myanmar-risk-shock-waves-across-region>.

⁷ Reuters, "Myanmar junta says voter turnout at 52% in first phase of election," Dec. 31, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-junta-says-voter-turnout-52-first-phase-election-2025-12-31/>

This paper aims to contribute to broader debates on the role and reform of regional organizations in confronting unconstitutional changes of government. Ultimately, I argue that unless ASEAN adapts its decision-making processes, strengthens enforcement mechanisms, and moves beyond symbolic diplomacy, it will risk both irrelevance in the Myanmar crisis and erosion of its standing as the preeminent regional forum for peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

Historical Context: Myanmar and ASEAN Dynamics

Myanmar's Entry Amid Controversy

Myanmar's admission into ASEAN in 1997 was one of the most controversial enlargements in the bloc's history. At the time, Myanmar was under severe international sanctions and diplomatic isolation following the military's suppression of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and its refusal to recognize the results of the 1990 general election, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) had won overwhelmingly.⁸ Western governments, particularly the United States and the European Union, opposed Myanmar's entry, arguing that the inclusion of a pariah state would undermine ASEAN's credibility.⁹ Yet ASEAN defended its decision under the principle of "constructive engagement," maintaining that bringing Myanmar into the regional fold would promote gradual reform through exposure and dialogue rather than isolation.¹⁰ While this strategy provided Myanmar with diplomatic cover and access to regional trade and political forums, it also foreshadowed the recurring tension between ASEAN's normative ambitions and the realpolitik calculations of its member states.

⁸ David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 149-153.

⁹ Avery D. H. Poole, "Cooperation in Contention: The Evolution of ASEAN Norms," *YCIS Working Paper* no. 44 (York University, January 2007), 10-14, <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/88367ba8-99dc-4b00-b4da-34482a4a4d9b/content>

¹⁰ Catherine Shanahan Renshaw, "The Case of Myanmar and ASEAN," in *Democratic Transformation and Regional Institutions* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), 37-39, <https://d-nb.info/1038738946/34?utm>

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, "Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma," Dec. 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/12/06/crackdown/repression-2007-popular-protests-burma>.

¹² UNHCR, *Rohingya Emergency*, accessed August 2025, https://www.unhcr.org/us/emergencies/rohingya-emergency?utm_source=

¹³ United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar," Sept. 2018,

A History of Internal Crises

Since its entry, Myanmar's domestic turmoil has consistently resurfaced on ASEAN's agenda, often as a divisive issue. The violent suppression of peaceful protests during the 2007 Saffron Revolution drew widespread condemnation but resulted in muted ASEAN responses, reflecting the bloc's reluctance to openly challenge a member's internal governance.¹¹ A more acute challenge came with the 2017 Rohingya crisis, when Myanmar's military launched mass atrocities in Rakhine State, displacing over 750,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh.¹² United Nations fact-finding missions later concluded that the military had committed acts of genocide.¹³ While international actors demanded accountability, ASEAN largely confined itself to humanitarian assistance under the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre).¹⁴ This cautious approach raised profound questions about ASEAN's human rights credibility and highlighted the limits of its institutional framework in addressing atrocities committed by a member state.

Spillover into the Region

The crisis following the 2021 coup has amplified the regional spillover effects of Myanmar's instability. Intensifying armed conflict and repression have displaced more than 3.5 million people, with many fleeing across borders into Thailand, India, and Bangladesh.¹⁵ Humanitarian agencies estimate that approximately 20 million people require aid, including food, shelter, and medical support.¹⁶ The porous borders between Myanmar and its neighbors have facilitated an uptick in illicit arms flows and narcotics trafficking, worsening transnational security risks.¹⁷ Thailand has struggled to manage refugee inflows along its western frontier, with more than 100,000 displaced Myanmar nationals losing

A/HRC/39/64, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/myanmar-ffm/reportofthe-myanmar-ffm>.

¹⁴ ASEAN, "Statement of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance," Nov. 2017, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/1.ASEAN-Chairmans-Statement-on-the-Rakhine.pdf>.

¹⁵ UNHCR, "Myanmar Emergency," accessed August 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/emergencies/myanmar-emergency>.

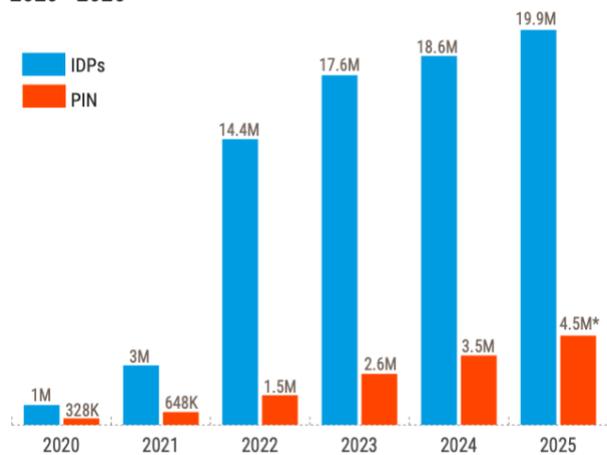
¹⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Myanmar," accessed August 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/myanmar>.

¹⁷ The Guardian, "China's deadly divide-and-rule tactics in Myanmar risk shock waves across the region," August 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/25/chinas-deadly-divide-and-rule-tactics-in-myanmar-risk-shock-waves-across-region>.

access to essential food and medical aid due to US funding cuts in 2025.¹⁸ Meanwhile, neighboring powers such as India have tightened border security, particularly in states like Manipur, in response to escalating conflict spillovers and militant movements from Myanmar.¹⁹ These developments underscore the regional ramifications of Myanmar’s conflict, demonstrating that ASEAN’s inability to address the crisis is not merely a question of internal governance but a matter of regional security and humanitarian stability.

People in need and displacement trends

2020 - 2025



* IDP projection for 2025

People in need and displacement trends in Myanmar from 2020 to 2025. Source – UNOCHA Myanmar

Structural and Legal Constraints in ASEAN

The ASEAN Way and Non-Interference

At the heart of ASEAN’s institutional culture lies the so-called “ASEAN Way,” a diplomatic ethos built on informality, consensus, and the principle of non-interference in members’ domestic affairs.²⁰ While this approach has been credited with preserving unity among highly diverse regimes ranging from democracies to one-party states and monarchies, it has consistently constrained ASEAN’s ability to

respond to acute political crises. In the context of Myanmar, the non-interference approach has acted less as a shield for sovereignty than as a barrier to timely and meaningful regional intervention. Member states that favor engagement with the junta, such as Cambodia and Thailand, have invoked this principle to resist stronger measures, while others, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, have sought to stretch ASEAN norms toward greater accountability. The result has been diplomatic gridlock.²¹

This contradiction is especially evident when ASEAN’s foundational norms are contrasted with the severity of the Myanmar crisis. On the one hand, ASEAN aspires to “centrality” in regional security affairs; on the other, it avoids interference in a member’s internal political order even when that order collapses through an unconstitutional seizure of power.²² This contradiction has left the bloc vulnerable to accusations of paralysis and irrelevance, as outside observers, including international media and think tanks, increasingly portray ASEAN as unwilling or unable to act decisively.

Charter Gaps on Unconstitutional Seizures of Power

The ASEAN Charter, adopted in 2008, codified many of the bloc’s guiding principles but failed to provide mechanisms to address unconstitutional changes of government. Article 7 empowers ASEAN summits to take “appropriate actions” in emergencies, yet no provisions exist for suspending or sanctioning a member following a coup.²³ Unlike the African Union, which explicitly prohibits and penalizes unconstitutional seizures of power, ASEAN has avoided codifying such norms for fear of undermining sovereignty.²⁴

This omission proved critical in February 2021. When Myanmar’s generals deposed the elected NLD government, ASEAN lacked any legal basis to impose punitive measures.²⁵ Instead, it fell back on its standard practice of appointing envoys and issuing

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Thailand: Aid Cuts Put Myanmar Refugees at Grave Risk,” August 11, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/11/thailand-aid-cuts-put-myanmar-refugees-at-grave-risk>.

¹⁹ Reuters, “Fighters from Myanmar civil war aggravate bitter ethnic conflict in India,” Dec. 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/fighters-myanmar-civil-war-aggravate-bitter-ethnic-conflict-india-2024-12-20/>.

²⁰ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (Routledge, 2009), 63.

²¹ Richard Javad Heydarian, “Why Southeast Asia Just Can’t Seem to Cut Off Myanmar’s Junta,” *TIME*, Oct. 20, 2022, <https://time.com/6326274/asean-myanmar-junta-trade/>.

²² Mely Caballero-Anthony, “The ASEAN Way and the Changing Security Environment,” *International Affairs* 98, no. 5 (2022), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9187923/>.

²³ ASEAN Charter, Article 7, “ASEAN Summit,” ASEAN Secretariat, 2008, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

²⁴ African Union, *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*, 2007, Article 23, <https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36384-treaty-african-charter-on-democracy-and-governance.pdf>.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup* (Briefing No. 166, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b166-responding-myanmar-coup>.

statements of concern, measures widely criticized as inadequate given the magnitude of the crisis. The absence of enforcement tools reinforced the junta's calculation that it could weather ASEAN criticism without meaningful consequences.

Procedural Delays in Crisis Response

ASEAN's structural reliance on consensus-based decision-making further undermined its ability to act quickly. Convening an emergency summit requires prior consultations among foreign ministers, meaning that even in the face of escalating violence, procedural requirements slowed decision-making. After the February 2021 coup, ASEAN did not convene a Special Leaders' meeting until 24 April 2021 - more than two months later.²⁶ By then, hundreds of civilians had been killed, mass protests violently suppressed, and humanitarian conditions had deteriorated sharply.

The delayed response illustrates how ASEAN's procedures, designed for cautious diplomacy, are ill-suited to fast-moving crises. The absence of "qualified majority voting" or alternative mechanisms means that even one reluctant state can prevent action. In practice, this has allowed members with close ties to the junta to delay collective measures, rendering ASEAN's crisis management ineffective. The lesson from Myanmar is that ASEAN's institutional design, while fostering unity in less volatile circumstances, collapses under the weight of urgent political breakdowns.

The Five-Point Consensus: Framework and Failures *Framework Overview*

At a Special Leaders' meeting in Jakarta on 24 April 2021, ASEAN unveiled its principal diplomatic tool to address Myanmar's crisis: the Five-Point Consensus (5PC). The framework committed Myanmar's military to:

1. **Immediate cessation of violence** in the country.
2. **Inclusive dialogue among all parties** to foster political reconciliation.

3. **Appointment of an ASEAN Special Envoy** tasked with mediating and facilitating dialogue.
4. **Provision of humanitarian assistance** through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre).
5. **A visit to Myanmar by the Special Envoy** to meet "all parties concerned."

ASEAN leaders portrayed the consensus as a significant breakthrough, with Indonesian President Joko Widodo declaring that the plan represented "ASEAN's unity in action."²⁷ However, even at the time of adoption, scholars and practitioners noted the ambiguity of the commitments. The text lacked clear enforcement mechanisms, deadlines, or benchmarks, leaving compliance entirely dependent on the goodwill of the very military regime accused of orchestrating violence. The consensus was more a political signal of ASEAN unity than a binding roadmap, providing the junta with diplomatic cover while allowing ASEAN to claim initiative.



The ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was convened on 24 April 2021 at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia, and chaired by Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam. Credit - ASEAN

Critics emphasized that, despite calling for inclusive dialogue, the 5PC failed to explicitly include the National Unity Government (NUG), ethnic armed groups, or civil society, effectively privileging engagement with the military regime.²⁸ As I have

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, "ASEAN: Withdraw Invite to Myanmar Junta Leader," April 21, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/21/asean-withdraw-invite-myanmar-junta-leader>.

²⁷ ASEAN Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting," April 24, 2021, <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-on-the-asean-leaders-meeting-24-april-2021-and-five-point-consensus-2/>.

²⁸ ASEAN Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting," April 24, 2021, <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-on-the-asean-leaders-meeting-24-april-2021-and-five-point-consensus-2/>.

argued, this omission undermined the credibility of the framework from the start: it effectively marginalized the democratic opposition, even as ASEAN rhetorically emphasized “inclusive dialogue.”

Performance Disparities and Structural Gaps

The subsequent four years revealed how poorly the consensus was implemented. Despite pledges to halt violence, the junta intensified its military operations, escalating airstrikes, artillery bombardments, and systematic repression of civilians. The appointment of Special Envoys beginning with Brunei’s Erywan Yusof, followed by Cambodia’s Prak Sokhonn, Indonesia’s Retno Marsudi, and Laos’ Alounkeo Kittikhoun failed to establish meaningful engagement, as the junta repeatedly restricted access to detained leaders and opposition groups.²⁹

Humanitarian assistance channeled through the AHA Centre has been consistently obstructed and politicized. The Myanmar military junta has exerted control over aid delivery, raising concerns that relief efforts are being directed toward military-held areas and personnel rather than reaching vulnerable communities in conflict zones.³⁰ Observers argued that ASEAN’s one-year rotational envoy mandate further compounded the problem, preventing sustained diplomacy and enabling Naypyitaw to “wait out” each envoy until the next rotation.³¹ As Turner Ruggi at the *Yale Review of International Studies* put it, the 5PC amounted to a superficial veneer of legitimacy preserving ASEAN’s collective image without compelling substantive behavioral changes from the junta.³²

Lapse Risk Amid December Elections

The junta’s announcement of elections scheduled on December 28, 2025 has added urgency to debates over the 5PC. ASEAN foreign ministers, under Malaysia’s chairmanship in July 2025, jointly declared that elections were “not a priority” and

insisted that the cessation of violence and inclusive dialogue must precede any vote.³³ Nonetheless, without explicit renewal, the 5PC risks quietly expiring after the election period, leaving ASEAN with no agreed framework to guide its engagement with Myanmar.

This scenario is especially concerning because it could enable the junta to claim ASEAN recognition and seek re-admittance into high-level meetings. Such normalization would “legitimize a sham process” and mark the de facto burial of ASEAN’s most visible diplomatic instrument.³⁴ For ASEAN, the danger is not merely the failure of the 5PC but the failure of its credibility as a conflict manager in Southeast Asia.

Fragmented Member-State Approaches

Divergent Strategies and Their Consequences

One of the most decisive factors undermining ASEAN’s response to Myanmar has been the lack of unity among its member states. While the bloc formally commits to collective decision-making, governments have in practice pursued markedly different strategies - some pressing for engagement with the democratic opposition, others leaning toward accommodation of the junta, and still others hedging for narrow security interests. The result is a fragmented regional posture that has blunted ASEAN’s leverage over Myanmar’s military authorities.

Malaysia and Indonesia: Proactive but Constrained Engagement

Malaysia and Indonesia have remained the most forward-leaning ASEAN members on Myanmar. Both have hosted representatives of the NUG and engaged selectively with ethnic armed organizations, arguing that any credible political process must include all major stakeholders, not only the junta.³⁵

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, “ASEAN’s Failed Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar,” April 22, 2022,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/22/myanmar-aseans-failed-5-point-consensus-year>.

³⁰ National Unity Government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statement, *Aid Under Attack: How Myanmar’s Military Junta is Weaponizing Humanitarian Relief* (April 2, 2025), <https://mofa.nugmyanmar.org/aid-under-attack-how-myanmars-military-junta-is-weaponizing-humanitarian-relief/>.

³¹ International Crisis Group, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup* (Asia Report No. 324, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b166-responding-myanmar-coup>.

³² Turner Ruggi, “Which Way for the ‘ASEAN Way’: The Myanmar Coup and ASEAN’s Response,” *Yale Review of International Studies*, Feb. 19, 2023,

<https://yris.yira.org/column/which-way-for-the-asean-way-the-myanmar-coup-and-aseans-response/>.

³³ Reuters, “ASEAN Agrees Myanmar Election Is Not Priority, Malaysia Says,” July 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-agrees-myanmar-election-is-not-priority-malaysia-says-2025-07-11/>.

³⁴ *The Australian*, “Myanmar Junta Exploits Diplomatic Fatigue to Call Sham Polls,” August 2025,

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/world/myanmar-junta-exploits-diplomatic-fatigue-to-call-sham-polls/news-story/0b5df428216dedf6cb343813824b0f37>.

³⁵ “Malaysian Foreign Minister and International Parliamentarians Demand Stronger Action on Myanmar,” ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, Sept. 19, 2022, <https://aseanmp.org/publications/post/malaysian->

Their stance became particularly visible in July 2025, when ASEAN foreign ministers, meeting in Kuala Lumpur, agreed that elections in Myanmar were “not a priority” and that the immediate focus should be on ceasing violence so “all parties can sit together.”³⁶ This line was reaffirmed at the 47th ASEAN Summit in October 2025, where leaders reviewed implementation of the 5PC, expressed “deep concern” over the lack of progress, and implicitly linked any future elections to prior steps on de-escalation and inclusive dialogue.³⁷

Following the first phase of junta-organized polling on 28 December 2025, Malaysia, as ASEAN chair, announced that the bloc would “assess post-election developments carefully,” signaling that recognition was far from guaranteed and that the 5PC remained the formal benchmark.⁵ Neither Malaysia nor Indonesia deployed official election observers, and both continued to emphasize that voting conducted amid war, mass displacement, and the exclusion of key political actors could not restore legitimacy.³⁸

Thailand: Strategic Ambiguity

Thailand has pursued what might be termed strategic ambiguity. Geography and dense cross-border ties have pushed Bangkok to prioritize border security, trade, and refugee management over public confrontation with the junta. Thai government has facilitated cross-border humanitarian relief in some areas and maintained back-channel communication with both the military and resistance actors, yet it has generally refrained from strong public criticism.³⁹ Thailand’s ambivalent posture was also evident in its support for a proposed four-country ASEAN delegation (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines) to visit Myanmar in late 2025 to assess conditions ahead of the year-end polls, a visit that

was later cancelled.⁴⁰ Bangkok did not send an official monitoring mission for the December vote, instead keeping its options open while signaling that it would follow broader ASEAN deliberations.

Philippines: Continuity with Cautious Critique

The Philippines has consistently called for reconsideration of ASEAN’s diplomatic toolkit, acknowledging that the 5PC has failed to yield tangible results. The Philippines has framed itself as supportive of a more effective regional approach while avoiding unilateral moves that might fracture ASEAN. Under its current administration, Manila has repeatedly affirmed commitment to implementing the 5PC and has acknowledged that the framework has delivered limited results.⁴¹ As incoming ASEAN chair for 2026, the Philippines has pledged to continue Malaysia’s strategy on Myanmar and to work within the existing consensus rather than unveil a wholly new formula.⁴² Ahead of the December polls, Philippine officials confirmed that ASEAN had not reached agreement on sending observers and that the bloc, as a whole, would not deploy an official monitoring mission.⁴³ Domestic labor and civil-society coalitions in the Philippines also urged the government not to legitimize the junta’s elections and to press ASEAN to maintain a firm line on non-recognition.⁴⁴

Cambodia: Accommodationist Tendencies

Cambodia, by contrast, has signaled a willingness to accommodate the junta’s narrative, with Prime Minister Hun Sen becoming the first foreign leader to visit Myanmar post-coup and advocating for inclusion of military officials in regional dialogue. During its ASEAN chairmanship in 2022, Phnom Penh prioritized engagement with the military

[foreign-minister-and-international-parliamentarians-demand-stronger-action-on-myanmar](#)

³⁶ “ASEAN agrees Myanmar election is not a priority, Malaysia says,” *Reuters*, July 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-agrees-myanmar-election-is-not-priority-malaysia-says-2025-07-11/>

³⁷ “ASEAN Leaders’ Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus”, Kuala Lumpur, Oct. 26 2025, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Final-ASEAN-Leaders-Review-Decision-on-the-Implementation-of-5PC-2025-as-adopted.pdf>

³⁸ “ASEAN to Assess Post-Election Developments in Myanmar, Malaysia PM Says,” *Reuters*, Dec. 29, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-assess-post-election-developments-myanmar-malaysia-pm-says-2025-12-30/>

³⁹ Paul Chambers and Kridsana Chotisut, “Neighbour to Civil War: Thailand’s Relations with Myanmar in 2024,” *Fulcrum*, July 8, 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/neighbour-to-civil-war-thailands-relations-with-myanmar-in-2024/>

⁴⁰ “ASEAN ministers call off Myanmar election visit after junta snub,” *The Irrawaddy*, Sept. 18 2025, [https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmars-](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmars-crisis-the-world/asean-ministers-call-off-myanmar-election-visit-after-junta-snob.html)

[crisis-the-world/asean-ministers-call-off-myanmar-election-visit-after-junta-snob.html](#)

⁴¹ “PBBM: ASEAN Member States in Consultations to Push Forward Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus,” Presidential Communications Office (Philippines), Oct. 9, 2024, https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-asean-member-states-in-consultations-to-push-forward-the-implementation-of-the-five-point-consensus/

⁴² “Philippines to Continue Malaysia’s Efforts in Ending Myanmar Crisis,” *Philippine Star*, Nov. 18, 2025, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/11/18/2487927/philippines-continue-malaysias-efforts-ending-myanmar-crisis>

⁴³ “No ASEAN Consensus Yet on Myanmar Junta-Led Polls, Marcos,” *Inquirer*, Oct. 29, 2025, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/296860/no-asean-consensus-yet-on-myanmar-junta-led-polls-marcos-confirms-2>

⁴⁴ “Groups Urge PHL to Refrain from Sending Myanmar Poll Observers,” *BusinessWorld Online*, Dec. 29, 2025, <https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2025/12/29/721573/groups-urge-phl-to-refrain-from-sending-myanmar-poll-observers/>

regime, including overtures to recognize its proposed “roadmap” toward elections.⁴⁵ Cambodian officials have downplayed the exclusion of opposition groups, presenting elections; however flawed as a potential first step toward normalization. This stance has been sharply criticized by human rights organizations, which argue that it effectively legitimizes the junta’s repression.⁴⁶ Cambodian officials indicated willingness to send observers to the 2025-26 polls, a move that drew criticism from regional civil-society organizations, which warned that such participation risked undercutting ASEAN’s own demands for a cessation of violence and inclusive dialogue.⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch and other groups urged all ASEAN governments to reject what they called the junta’s “farfical” election plans and to refrain from providing any appearance of endorsement.⁴⁸

Singapore: Strong Rhetoric but Limited Action

Singapore has been among the most outspoken critics of the coup and subsequent atrocities, describing developments in Myanmar as “a national shame” and suspending arms transfers to the military soon after the coup.⁴⁹ Yet, beyond export controls and rhetorical condemnation, Singapore has opted not to impose broad unilateral economic sanctions or formally recognize the NUG, preferring to operate within the parameters of ASEAN consensus. On the elections, Singapore echoed the October 2025 ASEAN Leaders’ Review language that cessation of violence and inclusive dialogue must precede any credible polls, and it did not send observers for the December vote.⁵⁰ Its approach exemplifies what might be called “principled minimalism”: maintaining a strong public line against junta abuses while avoiding steps that might expose Singapore to accusations of breaking ASEAN unity.

⁴⁵ Reuters, “Cambodia to take different approaches to Myanmar crisis as ASEAN chair,” Jan. 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodia-take-different-approaches-myanmar-crisis-asean-chair-2022-01-08/>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Why ASEAN Must Hold the Line on Myanmar’s Election,” Fulcrum, Dec. 23, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/why-asean-must-hold-the-line-on-myanmars-election/>

⁴⁸ “Myanmar: Junta’s Farfical Plans for Elections,” Human Rights Watch, March 11, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/11/myanmar-juntas-farfical-plans-elections>

⁴⁹ “Singapore Says ‘National Shame’ for Armed Forces to Use Weapons Against Own People,” Reuters, March 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-politics-singapore-jdUKKBN2AX07V/>

⁵⁰ “ASEAN Leaders’ Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus,” Oct. 26, 2025, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Final-ASEAN-Leaders-Review-Decision-on-the-Implementation-of-5PC-2025-as-adopted.pdf>

Timor-Leste: A New Member with a Justice-Oriented Voice

Timor-Leste’s formal admission as ASEAN’s 11th member at the Kuala Lumpur summit in October 2025 added a new and distinct voice to intra-ASEAN debate on Myanmar.⁵¹ With a history of violent occupation and a hard-won independence struggle, Timor-Leste has often expressed solidarity with Myanmar’s democracy movement. Even before accession, its leaders had criticized the coup and signaled support for stronger international accountability mechanisms.⁵² As one of the few Southeast Asian states party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Timor-Leste has been urged by regional and international civil-society organizations to refer the Myanmar situation to the ICC prosecutor under Article 14.⁵³ Now inside ASEAN, Dili could leverage both its ICC membership and moral authority as a post-conflict democracy to press the bloc toward a firmer stance on accountability and justice.⁵⁴

At the October 2025 summit, Timor-Leste’s leadership publicly welcomed ASEAN’s continued exclusion of the junta from top-level meetings and indicated that any credible election would need to involve broad participation and an end to indiscriminate violence.⁵⁵ It did not dispatch election observers, underscoring instead the need for genuine national dialogue and international legal scrutiny.

Junta Elections and ASEAN’s Fractured Signal

The junta’s three-stage general election beginning with the first phase on 28 December 2025 has sharpened these intra-ASEAN divides. Voting took place in barely a third of Myanmar’s townships, with large swathes of territory under resistance control

⁵¹ “East Timor Officially Becomes ASEAN’s 11th Member,” Reuters, Oct. 26, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/east-timor-officially-becomes-aseans-11th-member-2025-10-26/>

⁵² “East Timor Has a Historic Opportunity to Break ASEAN Deadlock on Myanmar,” Al Jazeera, Feb. 12, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/2/12/east-timor-has-a-historic-opportunity-to-break-asean-deadlock-on-myanmar>

⁵³ “Timor-Leste: Refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court,” Fortify Rights, Oct. 23, 2025, <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-2025-10-23/>

⁵⁴ “Timor-Leste Has Vital Role to Play in Holding ASEAN’s Line on Myanmar,” Fortify Rights, Oct. 31, 2025, <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-oped-2025-10-31/>

⁵⁵ “In AP Interview, East Timor’s President Says Personal Diplomacy Could Bring Myanmar Ceasefire,” Associated Press, Oct. 27, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/ramoshorta-east-timor-asean-myanmar-adbf83105c13f5664c1431185e4633e3>

effectively excluded; the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party claimed an overwhelming lead.⁵⁶ The United Nations and several governments condemned the process as a “theatre of the absurd,” pointing to mass disenfranchisement, the banning of the NLD and other opposition parties, and electoral violence.⁵⁷

As of early January 2026, no ASEAN member state has formally recognized the election as free or fair, and ASEAN as a bloc has declined to send observers. Yet the spectrum of positions ranging from Malaysia and Indonesia’s clear rejection, through the Philippines’ and Singapore’s cautious criticism, to Cambodia’s apparent readiness to engage with the post-election authorities has produced a fractured regional signal. This divergence reinforces the central argument of this paper: without greater cohesion and institutional backing, ASEAN’s Myanmar policy will remain vulnerable to the competing priorities of its own members.

Reform Proposals & Policy Instruments

Permanent Multi-Year ASEAN Envoy

A central weakness in ASEAN’s Myanmar diplomacy has been the rotating nature of the Special Envoy mandate, which shifts annually with the ASEAN chairmanship. This structure disrupts continuity, fragments institutional memory, and diminishes political trust among Myanmar stakeholders, who must repeatedly recalibrate relations with new envoys. A more effective model would be the establishment of a multi-year envoy position, appointed by consensus but insulated from annual leadership changes. Appointing a long-term envoy which will strengthen credibility and consistency would not undermine sovereignty but instead enhance institutional coherence and continuity of diplomatic pressure.

⁵⁶ “Myanmar Holds First Election Since Military Seized Power but Critics Say the Vote is a Sham,” *AP News*, Dec. 28, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-election-yangon-suu-kyi-hlaing-military-f361d4962d30b9c5c4741110bb1271ef>

⁵⁷ “Polls Close in First Phase of Myanmar Elections Widely Condemned as a Sham,” *The Guardian*, Dec. 28, 2025,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/28/myanmar-elections-voting-begins-under-junta-stranglehold-with-aung-san-su-kyi-banned>

⁵⁸ Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (April 2023), *ASEAN and the Myanmar Humanitarian Crisis: Overcoming Challenges and Identifying Pathways*, https://r2pasiapacific.org/files/9923/2023_ASEAN_Myanmar_Humanitarian_Crisis.pdf.

Independent Humanitarian Corridor Monitoring

The ASEAN’s humanitarian mechanism, the AHA Centre, has seen its effectiveness severely constrained by junta-imposed restrictions and ASEAN’s reluctance to authorize independent monitoring, raising concerns that emergency aid has been subject to political manipulation.⁵⁸ Critics argue that aid delivered under ASEAN and UN humanitarian programs in Myanmar risks politicization and diversion particularly in conflict zones where junta-imposed restrictions have limited access and enabled preferential distribution aligned with military interests.⁵⁹ To address this, ASEAN should pair AHA Centre operations with independent third-party and civil society oversight, ensuring that humanitarian corridors remain neutral and effective. Establishing a joint ASEAN-civil society monitoring group would mitigate legitimacy concerns while strengthening accountability to regional and global humanitarian standards.

Rapid Crisis Decision-Making Reforms

Perhaps the most critical institutional reform lies in ASEAN’s consensus-driven decision-making, which delays emergency responses. After Myanmar’s 2021 coup, ASEAN required more than two months to convene a Special Leaders’ meeting, by which point widespread violence and humanitarian deterioration had already escalated.⁶⁰ To avoid such paralysis, ASEAN should operationalize reforms proposed by the High-Level Task Force (HLTF) on the ASEAN Charter Review at the 42nd Summit (2023).⁶¹ These include mechanisms for “ASEAN Minus X” emergency decisions, allowing willing states to act collectively without full unanimity.⁶² Even modest procedural adjustments such as expedited voting thresholds for crisis responses would significantly improve ASEAN’s agility.

⁵⁹ *The New Humanitarian*, “Myanmar in-depth: Slow earthquake response underlines need to overhaul long-flawed international aid efforts,” May 16, 2025, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/05/15/myanmar-depth-slow-earthquake-response-underlines-need-overhaul-long-flawed>.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ ASEAN, “Chairman’s Statement of the 42nd ASEAN Summit,” May 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-42nd-ASEAN-Summit-1.pdf>.

⁶² Ralf Emmers, “ASEAN minus X: Should This Formula Be Extended?,” *RSIS Commentary*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Oct. 24, 2017, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/co17199-asean-minus-x-should-this-formula-be-extended/>.

Toward a Credible Reform Path

These proposals; permanent envoy, independent humanitarian monitoring, and rapid decision-making reforms do not require abandoning ASEAN's foundational norms of consensus and sovereignty. Instead, they represent calibrated adaptations while retaining ASEAN's distinct identity. By institutionalizing such reforms, ASEAN could begin to bridge the gap between rhetorical commitments and practical action, bolstering both its credibility and its capacity to manage regional crises.

ASEAN's Credibility Challenge

Establishing Precedents

The trajectory of ASEAN's response to Myanmar carries implications beyond the immediate crisis. By permitting a coup-born regime to retain regional participation without substantive accountability, ASEAN risks setting a dangerous precedent. If the junta is gradually normalized despite clear violations of democratic legitimacy and ongoing mass atrocities, future unconstitutional seizures of power within the region may be emboldened.⁶³ This permissive stance erodes the deterrent effect of ASEAN membership standards and undermines the bloc's credibility as a normative community bound by the principles of democracy and rule of law articulated in the ASEAN Charter.⁶⁴ Failure to act decisively risks ASEAN being perceived as an institution that prioritizes regime stability over regional order and democratic integrity.

Connection to Wider Security Risks

Myanmar's destabilization is inseparable from the broader security environment in Southeast Asia. The proliferation of armed resistance groups and escalating border militarization pose risks for Thailand, India, Bangladesh and China, while the

spread of illicit trafficking networks links Myanmar's instability to transnational crime across the Mekong region.⁶⁵ In recent years, that criminal ecosystem has increasingly centered on industrial-scale cyber-scams compounds in both Myanmar and Cambodia, where trafficked workers are forced to run online fraud operations that generate billions of dollars annually. In Myanmar, lawless border enclaves such as Myawaddy and Kokang have become hubs for these "scam factories," taking advantage of weak state control and the diversion of security forces to the civil war.⁶⁷ In Cambodia, casino zones and special economic areas around Sihanoukville and Poipet host similar compounds, with rights groups documenting widespread human trafficking, forced labor, and torture.⁶⁸ These developments deepen the nexus between Myanmar's conflict and regional organized crime, further eroding human security and governance across ASEAN's mainland sub-region.

Furthermore, the vacuum created by ASEAN's inability to manage the crisis opens opportunities for great power rivalry, with China and Russia offering political and military support to the junta while Western countries back democratic resistance groups. This proxy dynamic risks further entangling Myanmar's crisis with strategic competition in the South China Sea and beyond. ASEAN's chairmanship dynamics further underscore this fragility. The 2024 Lao chairmanship has drawn criticism for its limited capacity to navigate ASEAN's political complexities especially in balancing neutrality with assertiveness highlighting how a diplomatically constrained or economically dependent chair can exacerbate the bloc's diplomatic paralysis.⁶⁹ Unless ASEAN reforms its structures to transcend overreliance on rotating leadership, future crises may similarly reveal the bloc's incapacity to respond effectively.

⁶³ International Crisis Group, "Responding to the Myanmar Coup," Feb. 16, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b166-responding-myanmar-coup>.

⁶⁴ ASEAN, *Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*, 2008, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Alastair Macbeath, *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Cashing in on Conflict: Illicit Economies and the Myanmar Civil War*, March 10, 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illicit-economies-and-the-myanmar-civil-war/>.

⁶⁶ Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Myers, Wilson Center, "Myanmar's Military Is a Regional Destabilizer," August 29, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/myanmars-military-regional-destabilizer>.

⁶⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Cyberfraud Industry Expands in Southeast Asia, Targeting Victims Worldwide," Oct. 7, 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/2024/10/cyberfraud-industry-expands-southeast-asia/story.html>

⁶⁸ Amnesty International, "Cambodia: Government Allows Slavery, Torture to Flourish Inside Scamming Compounds," June 26, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/cambodia-government-allows-slavery-torture-flourish-inside-scamming-compounds/>

⁶⁹ David Hutt, *Radio Free Asia*, "Ineffectual Laos shows ASEAN's limits on Myanmar conflict," Oct. 20, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/asean-laos-myanmar-diplomacy-102024103753.html>.

Credibility Challenge

Taken together, ASEAN's credibility deficit on Myanmar is not peripheral but existential. The bloc has long branded itself as the centerpiece of regional architecture through concepts like "ASEAN centrality" and "ASEAN community." Yet centrality is contingent on performance. If ASEAN cannot act decisively in the face of atrocities within its own ranks, it will increasingly be dismissed as a forum of convenience rather than a meaningful guardian of regional security. In this sense, the Myanmar crisis is both a litmus test and a potential turning point: ASEAN should either adapt its mechanisms to restore credibility or accept marginalization in favor of extra-regional arrangements.



Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, participated in the Plenary Session of the 46th ASEAN Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, under the Chairmanship of Anwar Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia. Credit - ASEAN

Policy Recommendations

ASEAN's inability to decisively address the Myanmar crisis highlights the need for both immediate interventions and structural reforms. The following measures, calibrated across short-, medium-, and long-term measures, aim to restore ASEAN's credibility while maintaining sensitivity to sovereignty concerns that underpin the "ASEAN Way."

Short-Term: Restoring Pressure and Principles

Appoint a Multi-Year Envoy: ASEAN should appoint a permanent multi-year special envoy with a renewable mandate, breaking from the practice of

annual rotation. This will foster continuity, credibility, and sustained engagement with all stakeholders, including the National Unity Government (NUG), ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and civil society.

Do Not Recognize Sham Elections as Free and Fair:

ASEAN should publicly state that it cannot regard the junta's December 2025 - January 2026 elections as free and fair, given the exclusion of opposition actors and the use of violence and coercion to entrench military dominance. By issuing a joint declaration that these polls cannot be recognized as legitimate without inclusive participation and a verifiable cessation of violence, ASEAN would uphold the spirit of the Five-Point Consensus while pre-empting the risk of junta normalization.⁷⁰

These measures will sustain immediate pressure on the junta, prevent international misinterpretation of ASEAN's silence as acquiescence, and re-establish the bloc's principled credibility.

Medium-Term: Strengthening Responsiveness and Continuity

Re-Engineer Emergency Decision Processes:

ASEAN should revise its procedural rules to allow qualified-majority or "ASEAN minus X" decision-making in acute crises. The reliance on unanimity has repeatedly delayed interventions, as seen in the two-month gap between Myanmar's 2021 coup and the April Special Leaders' meeting. By adopting flexible arrangements, ASEAN could respond more swiftly without undermining overall unity.

Stand Up a Crisis Response Team:

ASEAN should establish a permanent Crisis Response Team (CRT) composed of political, humanitarian, and legal experts embedded within the ASEAN Secretariat. Tasked with real-time monitoring, early warning, and rapid coordination, this team would address the bureaucratic inertia that currently hampers the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre).

These reforms would reduce ASEAN's dependency on ad hoc summit diplomacy, institutionalize responsiveness, and enable a standing capacity to address Myanmar's evolving crisis.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar Junta's Farcical Plans for Elections", *HRW Dispatches*, March 11, 2025,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/11/myanmar-juntas-farcical-plans-elections>.

Long-Term: Institutionalizing Crisis Resilience

Amend the ASEAN Charter: ASEAN should pursue a targeted amendment to its Charter to explicitly address unconstitutional changes of government. Current provisions lack enforcement, preventing ASEAN from suspending or sanctioning members engaged in coups. Incorporating a clause which mandates suspension of member states following unconstitutional seizures of power, would institutionalize democratic resilience.

Integrate Conflict Norms into ASEAN's Legal Framework: In addition to sanctions provisions, ASEAN should codify norms on conflict mediation, humanitarian access, and transitional justice. This would transform the bloc from a passive observer into a proactive guarantor of peace, aligning ASEAN with its stated commitments under the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025.⁷¹

Long-term institutionalization would ensure that ASEAN's capacity to address future crises does not rely solely on political will or chairmanship activism, but on a legally binding framework that protects regional stability and democratic order.

Conclusion

ASEAN stands at a critical crossroads. The Myanmar coup has exposed the fragility of its institutional design, underscoring how norms of non-interference and consensus have become liabilities in moments of crisis. The bloc's fragmented responses ranging from Malaysia and Indonesia's engagement with the opposition to Cambodia's quiet acceptance of junta narratives illustrate how divergent national interests hollow out the possibility of unified action. Unless ASEAN strengthens its diplomatic continuity, builds enforcement capacity, and reforms its legal architecture, it risks being relegated to symbolic diplomacy rather than substantive conflict management.

What is at stake is more than Myanmar's democratic trajectory; it is ASEAN's own credibility as the region's stabilizing anchor. The Five-Point Consensus, once hailed as a breakthrough, has failed into irrelevance due to deliberate obstruction by the

junta and the bloc's weak implementation mechanisms. This failure has revealed the gap between ASEAN's aspirations and its operational capacity. Without a shift toward principled action backed by structural reform, ASEAN will remain reactive, fragmented, and vulnerable to external powers exploiting its disunity.

My analysis emphasizes that effective adaptation cannot be confined to rhetorical commitments. It requires structural transformation: revising decision-making processes to allow flexibility in emergencies, embedding long-term envoy mechanisms, and introducing binding provisions against unconstitutional power seizures. As the region faces transnational threats from coups and civil wars to climate-driven migration and great-power rivalry, the Myanmar crisis serves as a stark warning.

Unless ASEAN moves along this reform continuum, it risks repeating its failures not only in Myanmar but in future crises that may challenge the region's stability. But if it seizes this crisis as an opportunity for institutional reinvention, it can reassert itself as a credible actor capable of safeguarding peace, stability, and democratic resilience in Southeast Asia. The choice, ultimately, is whether ASEAN will continue to shield itself behind norms of non-interference or evolve into a body that can confront crises with unity, credibility, and resolve.

⁷¹ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025*, <https://asean.org/book/asean-political-security-community-blueprint-2025-2/>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AUNG THURA KO KO is a resident Vasey Fellow at the Pacific Forum and an East-West Center affiliate scholar. Aung previously worked at the Oxford Global Security Programme and holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of Oxford.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KIMBERLY LEHN is the Senior Director of the Honolulu Defense Forum (HDF) at the Pacific Forum. HDF seeks to facilitate dialogue and solutions between a wide range of actors from the private and public sectors to bolster deterrence in the face of an increasingly contested regional security environment.

She is a national security professional with over 20 years of experience in the U.S. federal government and in the private sector. She advises leading companies on national security issues and previously served in management and analytic roles at the Central Intelligence Agency as well as on assignments to the National Security Council, the Department of State, and on the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee. As a professional staff member, she focused on the national security challenges facing the United States, particularly strategic competition with China and Russia, and the important role alliances and partnerships play to build collective security.

She publishes regularly on national security, Indo-Pacific, and defense and technology issues. She is also a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis in Washington, DC.

MASON RICHEY is Associate Professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, South Korea), and Senior Contributor at the Asia Society (Korea). Dr. Richey has also held positions as a POSCO Visiting Research Fellow at the East-West Center (Honolulu, HI) and a DAAD Scholar at the University of Potsdam. His research focuses on U.S. and European foreign and security policy as applied to the Asia-Pacific. Recent scholarly articles have appeared (inter alia) in *Pacific Review*, *Asian Security*, *Global Governance*, and *Foreign Policy Analysis*. Shorter analyses and opinion pieces have been published in *38North*, *War on the Rocks*, *Le Monde*, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Forbes*, among other venues. He is co-editor of the volume *The Future of the Korean Peninsula: Korea 2032* (Routledge, forthcoming 2021).

MARIALAURA DE ANGELIS is a James A. Kelly Fellow at Pacific Forum in Hawai'i and an affiliated researcher at the East-West Center. She also serves as Senior Advisor at Track2Asia, a Brussels-based NGO specializing in Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogue between Europe and East Asia. A passionate advocate for peaceful conflict resolution, Marialaura has been actively involved in mediation efforts on the Korean Peninsula since 2008.

SANDRA ROSHONDA THOMAS is an Army Reserve Logistics Officer of 19 years who has served in the US and overseas during wartime. She has served in various assignments that has allowed her insights into the Defense Industrial Base as well as command Soldiers by the hundreds. She consults for various industry clients and supports them through the verification of data and developing their business processes. Under her business firm, Roshonda has hosted defense of the homeland wargames and been selected as a panelist to confer on critical materials, wargaming and supply chain logistics.

MOSES SAKAI is a Research Fellow at the Papua New Guinea National Research Institute and a member of the Young Leaders Program of the Pacific Forum. In June-July 2024, Moses was a visiting scholar on US Foreign Policy at the University of Delaware under the US State Department's Study of the US Institute (SUSI) for

Scholars Program. He is also a Regional Research Associate (honorary) since August 2025 of the Indo-Pacific Studies Centre (IPSC), a Sydney-based foreign policy think tank in Australia.

SHEEWON MIN (minsheewon@naver.com / kell8284@oxford.ac.uk) holds a Master's degree in Asian Studies from Georgetown University and is an incoming DPhil candidate in International Relations at the University of Oxford. Her research explores political behaviors of small and middle powers in the great power competition with a particular focus on international organizations and multilateralism.

AUNG THURA KO KO is a resident Vasey Fellow at the Pacific Forum and an East-West Center affiliate scholar. Aung previously worked at the Oxford Global Security Programme and holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of Oxford.