Chapter 9

The Indo-Pacific Competitive Space

From Japan to the Indian Ocean Region

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This chapter examines the major strategic goals, interests, and policies being pursued by Washington, Beijing, and Moscow in the Indo-Pacific region. It highlights the divergence of strategic interests between America's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and China's Community of Common Destiny framework. It also explores Russia's amorphous Eurasia and Euro-Pacific policy concept for the region. The interplay of intense regional interests and tensions makes the Indo-Pacific the most dangerous geographic region for a potential direct Great Power armed conflict for the remainder of the 2020s. Four potential flashpoints for direct Great Power war stand out: Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the disputed Sino-Indian Himalayan border. An analysis of the critical power tools each Great Power has for attaining strategic outcomes finds a mix of relative advantages. China retains a clear advantage in economic leverage across the region. It also continues to develop military tools and capabilities tailored for success in potential armed clash with the United States inside the First Island Chain. The United States has considerably expanded and integrated its diplomatic and military alliances and strategic partnerships across the region, retains ideological appeal with most countries there, and continues to command respect as a preferred security partner. Russia's growing profile features the modest appendage of military assets and diplomatic statements in support of Beijing. Moscow's allegiance to Chinese preferences in diplomatic initiatives and military exercises is likely to continue through 2030. But its direct support for any Chinese military activity is far less certain—especially in the case of a major armed clash along the Sino-Indian border involving Moscow's historic partner, India. Despite pronounced and growing regional tensions, there are opportunities for collaboration among the Great Power rivals. These require the establishment of military-to-military confidence building measures, communications structures, and guardrails to assure that Beijing and Moscow understand that accommodation of continuing U.S. presence is a better choice than overt conflict.

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Introduction

This chapter moves the book from an evaluation of the trajectory of Great Power competition (GPC) among the United States, China, and Russia in critical functional global arenas and domains into a review of their strategic competition in five critical geographic regions around the world. The first in the series of five chapters focused on regional GPC, this chapter addresses the interplay of China, the United States, and Russia in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2020, Russia did not matter much to an assessment of GPC there. At that time, Moscow had been evolving a greater role in the Indo-Pacific by turning some of its economic and diplomatic attention toward China to mitigate impacts from the economic sanctions that the United States and the West imposed in 2014 for Russia's initial paramilitary and military incursions into Ukraine and Crimea. However, Moscow still had a primary strategic focus on its troubled relations with the West and had limited capabilities to influence significant policies or outcomes compared to China or the United States.[1] That changed dramatically after Russia's February 2022 attempt to rapidly conquer Ukraine. Facing an avalanche of U.S./Western punitive economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation for its violation of international norms, Russia turned sharply toward engagement with China and other states in Asia and the western Pacific.

This chapter incorporates important facts and analysis of Russia's significantly evolved role in the Indo-Pacific during the first half of the 2020s. But its focus is on the Sino-American Great Power competitive dyad there. It initially summarizes the evolution of Great Power strategies and policy visions for the Indo-Pacific region during the first half of the 2020s, indicating the most conspicuous points of divergence and convergence among the Great Powers. The chapter then projects Great Power strategic aims and policy approaches likely for the second half of the 2020s, again emphasizing key elements that differentiate or align them among each strategic rival. It then provides detailed comparative analysis about the power capabilities and opportunities each Great Power is likely to reach for during the rest of the decade to achieve its strategic aims and the prospects for success considering their comparative advantages and limitations. This comparative analysis focuses on the five competitive areas shown in table 9.1: diplomacy and politics, ideology and information control (table rows 2 and 3 combined), military capacity, and economics.

The case of Taiwan is considered for its special resonance to the Sino-American Indo-Pacific regional rivalry. The chapter reviews the Taiwan dynamics in the section analyzing Great Power relative military capabilities across the Indo-Pacific region.

The chapter affirms that at mid-decade, the Great Powers continue to pursue strategic goals that display historic continuity in the Indo-Pacific region but against a backdrop of ever-evolving national power capabilities to achieve policy outcomes there. Formal American strategy seeks economic and diplomatic access to the region with a preference toward open communications and human liberties. The previous Joseph R. Biden administration sought to attain these objectives by projection of America power and influence through a thickening array of historic bilateral regional strategic partnerships and alliances into multilateral security relationships. China continues to prioritize domestic stability and to establish regional hegemony by pursuing long-standing claims of sovereignty over contested geographic spaces from the East China Sea, through Taiwan and the South China Sea (SCS), and onto the Himalayas. The People's Republic of China (PRC)'s economic strengths

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provide it significant regional influence—by attraction and via coercion. At the same time, its rapidly expanding military, space, and cyberspace capabilities are poised to amplify its powers of persuasion and intimidation by the end of the decade. Since 2022, Russia has expanded and extended its strategic attention toward Asia and the Pacific begun back in 2014. Russia's regional strategy remains to push back against Western efforts to isolate Russia through sanctions, champion a more competitive international landscape featuring multipolarity and Russian stature, and assist Russia in managing its ties with a rising China to optimal effect for sustained Russian status as a global and regional Great Power. Thus, while China was the central pillar of Moscow's turn toward Asia policy and the PRC remained uniquely important to Russian near-term survival, Moscow continued pursuit of its own Euro-Pacific power through regional political, military, and, to a lesser degree, economic relationships, notably with India, Mongolia, North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea), and Vietnam.

For America to compete effectively in the Indo-Pacific region over the remainder of the decade, it must continue to extend and enhance its advantages with existing alliances and security partnerships while actively promoting a more attractive vision of regional economic development and integration than offered by the PRC. To sustain credible American alliances, partnerships, and a meaningful regional presence, the United States must use the rest of the 2020s to establish credible multilateral security, diplomatic, and economic partnerships with regional resonance and staying power.

Evolution of Great Power Strategic Visions and Activities in the Indo-Pacific Region, 2020–2024 (The Big Movements)

This section summarizes the evolution of Great Power strategies and major policies during the first half of the 2020s. It demonstrates the points of continuity in strategic approach taken by the PRC and the United States as well as their most important early-decade updates and adaptations. The section also summarizes the major changes in Russian strategy and activities around the Indo-Pacific as Moscow found itself more and more reliant on relationships there to offset the direct costs of warfighting in Ukraine and the indirect costs of excommunication from most of the Western-normed global economy.

U.S. Strategic Evolution and Geostrategic Activities

From 2020 to 2024, the United States remained a champion of a liberal, open, rules-based economic and security order for the Indo-Pacific. The administration of President Biden continued to believe that America's long-standing diplomatic, miliary, and economic support of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework contributed significantly to the dominant pattern of stability and prosperity present across the region for decades.[2] It published a February 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy that declared:

> *The passage of time has underscored the strategic necessity of the United States' consistent role. At the end of the Cold War, the United States considered but rejected the idea of withdrawing our military presence, understanding that the region held strategic value that would only grow in the 21st century. Since then, administrations of both political*

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parties have shared a commitment to the region. . . . And the Trump Administration also recognized the Indo-Pacific as the world's center of gravity.[3]

The Biden administration largely concurred with President Donald Trump's first administration National Security Strategy assertion that Sino-American frictions were indicative of an unwelcomed and increasingly intractable press by Beijing to force an exit of the United States from the region and establish PRC hegemony as a "new normal" in Indo-Pacific.[4] Thus, the Biden administration did not go back on the Trump diagnosis of a new era of Sino-American Great Power competition globally or in the Indo-Pacific.[5]

However, the Biden administration ended the Trump administration's "America First" approach to strategic competition—an approach that talked about strengthening alliances but frequently exposed tensions between the United States and its regional allies. The Biden administration instead pursued FOIP principles introduced during Trump 1.0 with a more collaborative approach, extending and expanding the network of alliances and strategic partnerships there. The 2022 National Security Strategy, published in October that year, succinctly established America's Indo-Pacific strategic objectives and means to achieve them, stating:

As an Indo-Pacific power, the United States has a vital interest in realizing a region that is open, interconnected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. The United States will work with other regional states to keep the Indo-Pacific open and accessible and ensure that nations are free to make their own choices, consistent with the obligations under international law. We support open societies through investments in democratic interests, free press, and civil society. . . . And we will affirm freedom of the seas and build shared regional support for open access to the South China Sea—a throughway for nearly two-thirds of global maritime trade and a quarter of global trade. A free and open Indo-Pacific can only be achieved if we build collective capacity.[6]

Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy further elaborated on the importance of strategic partners and alliances across the region:

Under President Biden, the United States is determined to strengthen our long-term position in and commitment to the Indo-Pacific. . . . [W]*e recognize that American interests can only be advanced if we firmly anchor the United States in the Indo-Pacific and strengthen the region itself, alongside our closest allies and partners.*[7]

Like the first Trump administration, the Biden administration oriented its strategic approach in the Indo-Pacific against what it viewed to be growing Chinese coercive efforts to advance its sovereignty claims inside the First Island Chain and increasingly to extend greater PRC military presence through the Second Island Chain (see figure 9.1). From 2021 to 2024, the Biden Administration pursued American Indo-Pacific policy aims by updating and enhancing standing alliances and growing new strategic partnerships.[8] A key part of this process was to convert long-standing military relationships and activities into a cohesive multilateral web from those managed for over 70 years primarily through a bilateral hub-and-spoke alliance structure with Washington as the "hub" and the "spokes" flowing

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directly to American security partners in Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea (ROK).[9]

From 2017 to 2020, the first Trump administration successfully strengthened key bilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific region. It also expanded bilateral military cooperation with traditional allies such as Australia and Japan while using exercises and dialogues to reach out to nontraditional partners such as India, Malaysia, and Vietnam.[10]

Beginning January 2021, the Biden administration moved with a sense of urgency to adapt American policy initiatives toward an enhanced array of multilateral strategic partnerships and alliances to preserve and defend a FOIP.[11] It reframed America's broader regional strategic architecture with increased diplomatic presence and activism and alternative economic frameworks to those championed in Beijing. It reinforced India as an essential strategic partner to advance wider Indo-Pacific along its southern shoulder in South Asia and the eastern Indian Ocean region.[12]

The Biden team moved beyond traditional hub-and-spoke bilateral security arrangements around the region, stitching together bilateral partners into "minilateral" arrangements and forging new multilateral strategic partnerships. It extended long-standing bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea into a formal trilateral pact.[13] It enhanced and expanded Australian and Japanese participation in politico-military multilateral partnership with India as part of a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), orienting it on the provision vital services and augmenting security relationships across the entire Indo-Pacific region including the Indian Ocean region.[14] It launched a new multilateral strategic initiative known as AUKUS (a trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific region among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States).[15] It encouraged informal advances in bilateral security initiatives with and between India and South Korea. Under Biden, Washington also deepened bilateral relationships with Indonesia and Vietnam into comprehensive strategic partnerships, upgraded bilateral alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, and enhanced its engagement with the multilateral Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) into a comprehensive strategic partnership.[16] It also encouraged a new trilateral security partnership initiated by Tokyo in May 2022 linking Japan, the United States, and the Philippines as partners committed to defense and security against Chinese territorial encroachment or intimidation.[17]

The Biden administration advanced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), reaching agreements with 13 Indo-Pacific trade and finance partners to strengthen integrated supply chains, grow clean energy and infrastructure, and enhance tax and anticorruption efforts. More critical, American economic policy against China remained a serious dynamic of national strategy for the region. The Biden administration largely sustained the tariffs and trade sanctions levied by the Trump administration beginning in 2018—reinforcing the adversarial economic dynamics overshadowing the Sino-American global rivalry and its Indo-Pacific manifestations.[18]

Biden's tariffs on Chinese imports were much more narrowly tailored—specifically toward industries that the administration saw as strategic in nature. Much of this competitive economic work was done through the Inflation Reduction Act to support U.S. development of electric vehicles, batteries, and critical minerals. The Biden administration also raised targeted tariffs, specifically those on semiconductors, solar cells, and electric vehicles.[19] Si-

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multaneously, American regional strategy worked to reorganize and "de-risk" vital supply chains away from Chinese sources and manufacturers in favor of a growing array of regional strategic partners including Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea (for semiconductors and other advanced technologies), as well as and India, Indonesia, and Vietnam (in general manufacturing and raw materials).[20]

American diplomats focused on advancing a free and open region where individuals live in open societies; countries make independent political choices free from coercion; and at a regional level, where interstate problems are dealt with openly, rules are reached transparently and applied fairly, and goods, ideas, and people flow freely.[21] The Biden team also established new U.S. Embassies on three Pacific island nations and enhanced its United States Agency for International Development (USAID) presence at several others.[22]

The period from 2020 to 2024 featured an American strategy designed to preserve a FOIP through the coordination of U.S. national power tools with those of regional allies and partners to deter PRC aggression and shape Chinese activities without resort to U.S. military force. As the calendar turned to 2025, American strategy for the Indo-Pacific was poised to build on a new framework of interconnected multilateral, minilateral, and bilateral strategic relationships capable of a collective effort to resist coercive PRC actions and to prevent Chinese efforts to redefine the regional status quo away from the principles of FOIP. But this American approach to Indo-Pacific strategy will undergo a comprehensive review in the early months of the second Trump administration, with the potential for continuity, but with no assurance that America's early 2020s preference for close coordination with regional partners and allies will remain intact.

China's Strategic Evolution and Geostrategic Activities

Under Xi Jinping, China has attempted to restructure the regional order to enhance its effective control over contested regions and diminish U.S. influence. During the early 2020s, Xi did not promulgate new territorial claims but sought more vigorously to expand China's ability to defend its existing claims. In brief, China's assertions include roughly 2 million square kilometers in the South China Sea, including the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos and Scarborough Shoal; the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea, known in China as the Diaoyu's; and large swaths of territory in the Himalayas that Beijing contests with New Delhi, including Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. While China's claims long predate the Xi era, shifts in the regional military balance over the last few decades generated new options for Beijing to enforce its claims and has inspired greater confidence that coercive campaigns could be successful in altering the territorial status quo.

Chinese forces have been employed in several ways to expand control in these areas. Xi famously undertook a massive land reclamation program in the SCS beginning in 2013 and continuing through 2018, resulting in 3,200 new acres of territory. Military facilities were later built on three land features (Mischief Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Subi Reef), despite Xi's 2015 pledge to President Barack Obama that China would not militarize the region. Those positions enabled a larger presence of Chinese naval ships and fighters in the SCS. Moreover, in 2016, Beijing began "combat air patrols" in the area as a protest to a United Nations tribunal ruling that invalidated its claims. In November 2013, without consulting its neighbors, China established an air defense identification zone above the East China Sea,

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coinciding with an uptick in China coast guard patrols near the Senkakus. Chinese troops also built a network of roads and other infrastructure across the Himalayas, facilitating a larger and more permanent People's Liberation Army (PLA) presence close to the Line of Actual Control with India.

However, unlike Putin, Xi remained cautious in escalating disputes above the threshold of lethal violence. Chinese leaders had long considered the proper balance between right enforcement (*weiquan*) and stability (*weiwen*).[23] The goal was to achieve as much of China's territorial agenda as possible while maintaining a stable periphery, which was needed for the continuation of normal commercial activities throughout the region. China's leaders, in other words, were unwilling to jeopardize the prerequisites for economic growth and normal diplomatic relations to achieve rapid territorial gains, even if seizing territory was within the military's technical capabilities. Interactions at sea, in the air, and across the Sino-Indian border were often tense but rarely involved fatalities. An exception came in June 2020 with a deadly melee between Chinese and Indian troops in Aksai Chin's Galwan Valley, but it was doubtful that either side intended that result. Beijing and New Delhi quickly worked to cool tensions.

A second strategic aim for Xi was diminishing U.S. influence in the region. Throughout the post–Cold War era, Chinese leaders have assessed that U.S. strategy in Asia aims to constrain China's development and retain a hegemonic position.[24] During the early 2020s, most elements of U.S. policy were interpreted in Beijing through the lens of American hegemonic intent. Objectionable American policy elements included:

- the strengthening of treaty alliances and security partnerships
- the promotion of deeper connections between allies in formats such as the Quad, AUKUS, and the U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral
- military deployments and patrols
- arms sales to allies, partners, and Taiwan
- economic policies designed to reduce China's access to sensitive technology.

Beijing has also accused Washington of fomenting disorder within China itself. The 2019 Hong Kong protests, for instance, were portrayed as an attempt by the United States to instigate a color revolution. In a March 2023 address, Xi explicitly accused the United States of implementing "all-around containment, encirclement, and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedent severe challenges to our country's development."[25]

Based on those growing concerns, Xi's strategic approach during the early 2020s extended and articulated an earlier vision for an alternative regional order in which the U.S. role is significantly reduced. In a speech to a regional security summit in 2014, Xi stated that "it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia."[26] Xi forecast then that the hub-and-spokes system of U.S. alliances, which has anchored regional security since the Cold War, would gradually fade, overtaken by a more central role for China and regional institutions not dominated by the United States. At a follow-up summit in 2024, Xi reiterated his contention that "military alliances with third parties" are "disadvantageous" for regional security.[27] A white paper on national security released in May 2025 similarly contrasted U.S.-led alliances and "small

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groups" with China's favored approach of expanding "equal, open, and cooperative global partnerships."[28]

In the view of Chinese analysts, the most effective way to achieve this vision would be through a wedging strategy to weaken U.S. security relationships, mainly by leveraging diplomatic, economic, and informational power.[29] Most important, China's perception of its own status as the leading economic partner for most surrounding countries, including close U.S. allies such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea, would dilute, they believed, the appetite in those states for a more confrontational posture toward China. Beijing could also marshal new arrangements such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and new lending as part of the Belt and Road Initiative to win friends and influence.

The strategic challenge for Xi in the early 2020s was enhancing China's position in territorial disputes while persuading neighbors to avoid closer alignment with the United States. Contestation with rival claimants such as India, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam mainly served to increase perceptions in those countries of China as a looming challenge, ultimately convincing them to strengthen ties with the United States.[30] This unintended consequence of China's territorial assertiveness was undermining its own strategy to drive wedges between Washington and many of its Indo-Pacific allies and partners. The revival and strengthening of the Quad and growing interest in the Philippines to host U.S. rotational forces took place in this context. Chinese overreactions in various political disputes, frequently triggered by sensitivity to criticism, had a similar effect. Australia leaned closer to the United States, ultimately signing onto AUKUS, due to frictions with Beijing that began when former prime minister Scott Morrison called for an investigation into the origins of the global pandemic.

As Xi marked his first decade in office in 2023, neither of his primary regional strategic aims had been realized. On one hand, while Chinese forces exercised presence in contested regions as never before, rivals continued to occupy sensitive features in the South China Sea and across the Himalayas. Japan showed no signs of relinquishing its administrative control over the Senkakus. U.S. officials continued to reiterate that the Senkakus and parts of the Spratly's fell under mutual defense agreements with Japan and the Philippines, respectively. On the other hand, while most countries in the region valued market access to China and hedged between the two major powers—and few supported the creation of a fully institutionalized multilateral alliance like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—security ties deepened between Washington and its Asian allies and partners during the Trump and Biden administrations. Xi was left with a disappointing combination of unrealized territorial ambitions and a security architecture in which the United States retained a leading role.

Russia's Strategic Evolution and Geostrategic Activities

Russia's main strategic aims in the Indo-Pacific have long been to balance against U.S. interests in the region, providing an alternative to Washington. From the early 2010s, Moscow has undertaken a "pivot to the East" strategy in response to increasing sanctions imposed on it by the United States and the European Union. This pivot away from Europe and the West involved increasingly closer ties with China, which has a dominant presence across the Indo-Pacific and similarly opposes U.S. strategic interests and activities there. The Indo-

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Pacific became truly vital for Moscow in 2022 after its invasion of Ukraine set in motion an avalanche of American and European punitive sanctions and all but forced Russia out of Western financial, commercial, and energy markets and into the arms of China.[31]

Russia released a new foreign policy concept in March 2023, its first since 2016. The document marked a noteworthy acceleration of Moscow's strategy to pivot away from Europe and defined a new world order from a Russian perspective.[32] It also formally described Russia as a "Eurasian and Euro-Pacific" power.[33] Moscow's emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region moved from seventh place in its 2016 foreign policy priorities to fourth. Russia's 2023 foreign policy concept update avoided use of the term *Indo-Pacific*, reflecting Moscow's alignment with China's argument that this American-sponsored term was part of Washington's strategy to contain China rather than a legitimate initiative to enhance Indian influence within the Indian Ocean and across the Indo-Pacific region. Moscow strategic analysis thus regarded American-led minilateral groupings such as the Quad and AUKUS as analogous to NATO in Asia and as components of the broader American strategy to enmesh India into anti-China alignments.[34]

The Russia-China rapprochement between 2022 and 2024 appeared to be driven more by immediate economic challenges and ideological similarities than by durable political alignment. Both nations do share a deep enmity toward American global dominance and the promotion of "liberal values," preferring a multipolar world order to the one long dominated by the United States. But this shared anti-Americanism is not yet an unassailable basis for the kind of strategic partnership based on "limitless cooperation" touted in public proclamations by Putin and Xi from 2022 to 2024.[35] Long-term cooperation is constrained by China's export-oriented economic model, which is a grave threat to Russian markets if unleashed fully, by Beijing's reluctance to come firmly on-side with Putin in the Russia-West confrontation over Ukraine, and by a history of geostrategic mistrust over legitimacy and demography in the vast lands of eastern Russia that once were claimed—and may yet again be claimed—by China before conquered by Russia in the 1700s and 1800s.[36]

For these reasons, Russia continued to pursue a broader strategy as a "Euro-Pacific" power by strengthening bilateral ties with multiple countries across the Indo-Pacific region. Recovering slowly from its global and regional setbacks in the immediate wake of the war in Ukraine, Russia returned to the Asia-Pacific region to refresh historical strategic ties with countries like India, Indonesia, North Korea, and Vietnam.[37] Of specific note, the Russia–North Korea Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed on June 19, 2024, was a major endeavor securing for Moscow necessary mechanisms to enhance its influence in East Asia independent of Beijing. However, this treaty appeared to let Moscow refrain from direct involvement in North Korean border conflicts or skirmishes while simultaneously establishing a basis for greatly expanded North Korean support of Russia in the Ukraine conflict. Indeed, North Korea facilitated the late 2024 deployment of about 12,000 of its soldiers to Russian commands in Ukraine and enabled North Korean labor to work at Russian wartime industries.[38] Although the specific details of this Russia–North Korea treaty remain unclear, the Moscow-Pyongyang rapprochement could have negative repercussions for Sino-Russian relations. As North Korea's principal patron, Beijing is unlikely to overlook Pyongyang's efforts to cultivate new alternatives through closer military-political and trade-economic ties with Russia.[39]

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At mid-decade, Russia's strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific is much smaller than that of China and the United States, the two dominant Great Powers vying for the upper hand there. However, during 2023–2024, Moscow demonstrated that it could pursue strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific as a useful distraction and complicating factor for Washington (and Europe) at the same time it sought to stave off defeat in Ukraine and Biden administration efforts to erode Russia's Great Power status. While shoring up ties with China, India, and Vietnam, greatly expanding its strategic relationship with North Korea, or conducting an array of joint military exercises with China across the wider sweep of the Pacific region, Russia's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific evolved from one negligible in 2020 to one that in 2025 cannot be ignored.[40]

Great Power Aims Across Indo-Pacific Region: 2024 and Beyond

The following section sketches the evolving strategic interests and competitive focus of the Great Powers across the Indo-Pacific region anticipated for the past half of the decade. It extends many of the insights generated in the last section addressing Great Power strategies and geostrategic activities in the first half of the 2020s. Whenever available, the section directly references the strategic documents or leadership speeches that establish Great Power's strategic aims and means to attain them.

TEXTBOX 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

America's Geostrategic Aims and Trajectory

The Indo-Pacific region will continue to receive significant U.S. strategic attention in a second Trump administration, and U.S. regional strategy during the second half of the 2020s will be informed by intensifying Sino-American competition there. Trump's approach to the region can be expected to inspire far more intensive direct competition and confrontation with China, especially in the economics arena.[41] At the same time, the American leadership necessary to entrench and empower the multilateral and minilateral security partnerships built out across the Indo-Pacific during the Biden administration may receive less attention. A second Trump administration is likely to sustain American military and political activism in the western Pacific Ocean, working on specific security projects and military transactions with allies like Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea that push back against Chinese regional ambitions.

However, a new Trump administration should be expected to demand greater burden-sharing from its security partners, be less generous about underwriting weaker regional partners, and be less supportive of specific economic or military equipment deals with partners unwilling to pay for the privilege of American partnership.[42] American participation in the Quad and AUKUS minilateral security arrangements seem likely to endure, but with less consistent impetus from Washington and mainly when these partnerships directly support individual U.S. military arms sales, bilateral economic advantage, or bolster the optics of Trump's America First agenda.[43]

The second Trump term likely will emphasize efforts to secure greater direct relative regional economic advantage over China with tariffs and sanctions as its primary instru-

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ments. During his 2024 campaign, one of President Trump's key promises was to raise—by at least 60 percent—tariffs on all imports from China. Then in the first weeks of his administration, Trump implemented a 10 percent across-the-board tariff on all goods from China.[44] As with the 10 percent announcement of early February 2025, Trump's tariffs seem destined to be far less targeted than those applied by the Biden administration and likely will feature wider application against traditional American regional allies and partners believed by the White House to be part of Beijing's plans for tariff evasion. Candidate Trump also promised to ask Congress to revoke China's permanent normal trade relations status, an act that if taken could see the PRC join Belarus, Cuba, North Korea, and Russia and denormalize Sino-American trade for the first time in a quarter century.[45]

Somewhat paradoxically, a second Trump administration may be willing to establish special carve outs and exceptions to its tariffs on China, particularly for the leaders of American businesses on favorable terms with the President.[46] It is unlikely that the Trump administration will prioritize cooperative, multilateral trade or commercial arrangements with traditional friends and partners in the region. Nascent Biden administration plans to partner U.S. defense firms, shipbuilders, semiconductor manufacturers, and other high-tech businesses with important counterparts in Indo-Pacific strategic partner states seem destined for a comprehensive review and rescoping in line with America First priorities.[47] Biden's signature CHIPS and Science Act of 2022—including U.S. subsidized advanced semiconductor manufacturing partnerships with South Korea and Taiwan—may run afoul of Trump skepticism and see implementation slowed or halted.[48] The Trump administration also may view even the modest promise of the Biden Indo-Pacific Economic Framework multilateral trade arrangement to be a bad deal for American workers and the America First priority against entangling trade partnerships and allow IPEF to die a quiet death.[49]

At the same time, the Trump team may exercise caution on Taiwan, opting to avoid unnecessary provocation that might put the United States into a direct military clash with the PRC and instead focus on economic confrontation with China. On the 2024 campaign trail, candidate Trump did not indicate whether America would commit troops to the island's defense against China, but Trump stated that he would respond to a Chinese invasion with 150 to 200 percent tariffs on Chinese goods. Trump also stated that Taiwan should begin paying the United States for its defense against China, leaving the new U.S. administration's ultimate commitment to Taiwan's security uncertain.[50] It remains to be seen if a Trump administration will push Congress for legislation featuring greater U.S. support for Taiwanese sovereignty—akin to the Senate-passed Taiwan Policy Act of 2022.[51]

In the disputed South China Sea region, the Trump team has signaled it will use tough rhetoric against China's unsupported claims to sovereignty there but will be cautious about any direct military confrontation. The 1951 U.S. security treaty with the Philippines obligates Washington to support Manila in the event of an armed attack. Neither Beijing nor Washington desire to spark a military clash triggering that American treaty obligation over the Sino-Philippines disputed claims in the SCS.[52] So, as with the PRC threat to Taiwan, a second Trump administration seems most likely to fully pursue gray-zone activities short of armed conflict when contesting Beijing's intensifying assertion of SCS primacy.[53]

As in the first, a second Trump term is likely to place much less value on democracy, human rights, or climate management as criteria for regional strategic partners or secu-

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rity transactions. Direct interaction with North Korea may again be featured. States like Vietnam and Thailand may find greater receptivity in Washington for bilateral strategic interactions.[54]

In the Indian Ocean arena of the Indo-Pacific, a Trump administration strategy seems set to primarily rely on reinforcing supply chains, connectivity, and technology collaboration, particularly with India, mainly to counterbalance Chinese economic influence, but only so long as these do not in any way disadvantage American First commercial or financial interests. Evolving American strategy there could also involve other regional partners like Australia and Japan, bilaterally as well as through the Quad format, but seems likely to have a security-oriented approach and be less integrated with soft power activities with America's Pacific strategic partners than witnessed under President Biden.[55]

Overall American strategy for the Indo-Pacific region appears likely to feature substantive adjustments during the latter half the 2020s. The second Trump administration will continue America's geostrategic focus on countering China across the region, but with more unilateral actions, direct bilateral transactions, less multilateralism, or predictability than featured in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy under the Biden administration (and with some unpredictable surprising twists).

China's Geostrategic Aims and Trajectory

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted many international observers to ask whether Xi Jinping might reverse China's long-standing hesitance to escalate tensions above the threshold of lethal violence with its neighbors. The locus of attention was on Taiwan, where tensions between Beijing and Taipei had been increasing since the election of Democratic Progressive Party candidate Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. Observers wondered whether Xi, frustrated by Taiwan's apparent pursuit of de jure independence—worried about his own legacy and emboldened not only by unrivaled power within China but also the availability of stronger military capabilities—would seek a military solution to the cross-Strait problem. The date 2027 entered the public discourse in North America, Europe, and Asia as a possible timeframe for China to launch military operations since this would coincide with the centennial anniversary of the PLA and Xi's prospective fourth term in office.[56]

Others thought that Xi was unlikely to follow in Putin's footsteps. First, Russian operations in Ukraine demonstrated the major risks and costs of escalating tensions with neighbors, both militarily (Russian forces failed to achieve their initial goals) and economically (the West coalesced around a strong program of economic and diplomatic sanctions, which could be more severe after a Chinese invasion of Taiwan). Second, there are differences between the two leaders. Putin had long distinguished himself as a risk-taker, while Xi recognized the importance of stability for China's own development—and its long-range goal of "national rejuvenation" by the centennial of the People's Republic of China in 2049. Thus, maintaining a stable periphery and avoiding a clash with the United States is preferred, as Chinese leaders assume the United States would intervene on Taiwan's behalf. Third, there remained some hope, however distant, that peaceful reunification could succeed. "Peaceful," in this context, refers to the absence of war but not of coercion: China hoped that increasing military, economic, and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan would, over the long run, convince Taipei to negotiate a political settlement.

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Amid growing speculation about China's future behavior, a debate emerged in the United States about whether Beijing might be more conflict-prone in the 2020s because of the assessment that it would be in a worse long-term position as economic, demographic, and military problems accumulated in the 2030s and 2040s.[57] Supporters pointed to slowing growth, an aging population, and shifts in the military balance toward the United States (whose B-21 and other advanced capabilities were slated to come online in the 2030s) as evidence that Beijing might see a closing window of opportunity to use force against Taiwan. However, skeptics pointed out that there was little evidence for such thinking in Beijing's strategic circles and instead highlighted Xi's optimism that the Chinese system, buttressed by a view of increasing multipolarity in the international system, would perform well against the West in a long-term competition.[58] There were also positive economic and military trends that supported this sanguine assessment.[59]

While China's intentions toward Taiwan remained uncertain, it was clear that Xi would exercise a more muscular regional strategy to advance China's territorial claims in and beyond the Taiwan Strait and to counter what he saw as a more hostile U.S. policy. As tensions with Taiwan simmered, conflict escalated between China and the Philippines, where the government of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., was showing stronger support for U.S. military presence and digging in its heels in the Spratly's. The Second Thomas Shoal became a flashpoint as China deployed its coast guard, which by number and size of cutters was the region's largest, to challenge the resupply of a garrison of Filipino marines stationed on the shoal. The coast guard also expanded its presence around the Senkakus and in 2024 began a pattern of operating on all sides of Taiwan and in sensitive waters near Taiwan's offshore islands. Although territorial conquest through war might not be Xi's intent, the chances of conflict arising from a miscalculation between China and several of its neighbors were on the rise.

Xi was also committed to a multifaceted strategy to break through what he perceived as a U.S. plot to "contain, encircle, and suppress" China. Militarily, this meant developing the tools needed to hold at-risk U.S. forces in the Western Pacific and to upgrade China's nuclear capabilities, which could be useful in dissuading Washington from intervening on behalf of Taiwan, Japan, or the Philippines.[60] Economically, Xi redoubled his commitment to a long-term goal of making China more technologically self-sufficient, which if successful would reduce the impact on China's national competitiveness and military modernization of U.S. attempts to restrict China's access to advance technology.[61] Diplomatically, Beijing tried to isolate U.S.-led arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS by framing them as "small cliques" and expanding China's influence in other institutions such as ASEAN.[62] China also provided support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, tying up U.S. financial and material resources in Europe that might otherwise have been reallocated to Asia.

Russia's Geostrategic Aims and Trajectory

Like China, Russia dislikes the term *Indo-Pacific*. It views the construct as one designed to isolate and exclude Beijing and Moscow from rightful regional status.[63] As noted earlier, Moscow evolved from a slow, deliberate migration of many economic, diplomatic, and security activities into the region between 2013 and 2021 into a far more substantive pivot from West to East under pressure after its February 2022 Ukraine invasion provoked a vigorous negative Western response.

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Accelerating Russian interactions in the Indo-Pacific appear to have three main objectives for the remainder of the 2020s. First, Moscow's Ukraine predicament makes it view support for China—which is now increasingly challenged by a growing network of U.S.-led allies and strategic partners in the region—as necessary for survival. China will clearly welcome greater Russian support. But Moscow's long-standing relationship with India may limit consummation of a Russia-China long-term regional axis; that would put Russia at cross-purposes with New Delhi. Chinese regional assertiveness and its growing violation of international rules and norms in the region rankle India and encourages New Delhi to request Russia distance itself from China once the gravest threats from its Ukrainian misadventure recede.[64]

Second, Russia appears likely to seek expanded geostrategic space in the Indo-Pacific to offset some of its loss of geostrategic maneuver space and influence in Europe—and on its terms as a "Euro-Pacific power." This theme appeared as a key driver in Russia's March 2023 update to its foreign policy. Moscow's new policy concept refers to Russia as a "Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power," identifying China and India (in that order) as top partners within the context of Russia's Eurasian foreign policy but not naming them as key partners in its Asia-Pacific policy. When addressing its post-2023 Asia-Pacific policy, Russia claims a far less ambitious and largely defensive agenda focused on safeguarding an open region and "nonpoliticized" engagement despite activities by others like the United States and its allies (although unnamed) to destabilize and militarize it.[65] Thus, one might expect Russia to act when necessary to support efforts by its Indo-Pacific partners (including China and India) to preserve a multipolar Asia-Pacific so long as these efforts reinforce rather than jeopardize Russian assertion of primacy in its Eurasian interests.

Moscow's third strategic objective for the Indo-Pacific links to its second. To overcome its post-Ukraine isolation from the West and buttress its status as a Great Power in the Euro-Pacific region, Moscow will seek to engage directly with those countries in the region that have remained unmoved by Western pressure to rebuke and isolate Russia.[66] China will remain the key partner in this effort, but Moscow must deepen other bilateral partnerships around the region if it is to retain the image of an autonomous Great Power there. This will be a challenge because its proposed regional partners remain apprehensive of Moscow's growing embrace of China and because Russia lacks both economic and diplomatic heft to play a useful role bilaterally with many of them.[67] But Russia's historic ties to India, North Korea, and Vietnam remain what they always were for Moscow—a definition of Russia's own Asian identity, separate from the Sino-Russian partnership and within a multipolar region.[68] Thus, Moscow should be expected to offer bilateral security assistance agreements that sustain its regional relevance and enhance its autonomy vis-à-vis China and in line with its March 2023 policy concept emphasizing a leading Russian future in Eurasia. Arguably, Moscow's June 2024 bilateral security agreement with North Korea was a prototype for future Russian actions in support of this regional strategic agenda. Future efforts with Indo-Pacific states like Burma, India, Thailand, and Vietnam might eventually follow.

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GPC Power Tools and Prospects for Indo-Pacific Success

Most countries in the Indo-Pacific region share U.S. concerns about the risks of Chinese power and hegemonic aspirations and have no desire to be left alone in a Chinese sphere of influence and forced to subordinate their interests to Beijing. However, at mid-decade, they retain a strategic wariness like they did in 2020—unwilling to unequivocally take sides with Washington, which could drag them into a confrontation with China destined to damage their economies (all of which depend heavily on trade with China), destabilize the region, and potentially lead to a devastating war. They seek to maintain a balance that allows them to cooperate economically with both the United States and China and limits Beijing's opportunities for coercion for fear of driving them into Washington's arms. Maintaining this balance became more challenging at mid-decade as China's regional military might grew notably and American regional diplomatic, political, and military activities softly encouraged Indo-Pacific states to more tightly align with American interests.

This section assesses the key tools and mechanisms available to Beijing, Washington, and Moscow to achieve their respective principal strategic aims across the Indo-Pacific. The section evaluates the Great Powers in the four major competitive categories of politico-diplomatic influence, ideological resonance and information infrastructure, military capabilities, and economic stature (see table 9.1). The section evaluates how the tools available to each rival could influence the trajectory of GPC across the regional arc from Japan to India during the remainder of this decade. This evaluation establishes that China's military capabilities have greatly expanded across the western Pacific during the 2020s and that growing Russian strategic military activity throughout the region and rhetorical support for China complicated but did not yet supplant comprehensive American power there.[69] Instead, the U.S. realignment of military assets and deepening multilateral political and security partnerships across the Indo-Pacific during the early 2020s established broader American influence and strategic partnerships that have complicated Beijing's regional calculus and increased the odds that Beijing cannot forcibly overturn the regional status quo at an acceptable cost before the end of the decade.

Political and Diplomatic Tools and Prospects

The United States. During the early 2020s, America's network of political and diplomatic relationships—alliances and partnerships—was an intense focus of the Biden administration. The Biden team inherited an array of mainly bilateral alliances and friendships across the Indo-Pacific institutionalized over decades and unmatched by China. These included regional alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, and important strategic partnerships with India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. It also fell in on post-2017 Trump administration minilateral strategic initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue engaging the United States, Australia, India, and Japan in a multilateral diplomatic and security framework aimed at offering alternative to China in the provision of support services across the Indo-Pacific region.

From 2021 to 2024, the United States took a significant number of initiatives to enhance and extend regional politico-diplomatic engagements, both bilateral and multilateral. First, senior American diplomats and White House officials made regional presence a priority. From its January 2021 inauguration, the Biden administration prioritized travel and diplo-

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matic contact across the region as a key agenda item and a precursor for other important initiatives in its Indo-Pacific strategy agenda. Its first high-level delegation, led by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin traveling in a supporting role, launched into the Indo-Pacific in March 2021.[70] Over the next 4 years, Biden senior leaders flooded the region with dozens of top-level visits on a pace not witnessed before in the 21st century. Secretary Blinken personally conducted almost 20 regional visits over 4 years.[71] Biden himself made historic visits to Vietnam and Indonesia in 2023, upgrading bilateral relations into Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships while there. He also hosted state visits in Washington for the ROK president, the Japanese prime minister, and the Australian prime minister with an aim to demonstrate their enduring importance to American strategy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.[72]

Second, the State Department opened new diplomatic venues in key strategic nations and territories across the region. The United States opened new Embassies in Maldives, Tonga, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. It funded two new consulates in India opening in 2025 at major, strategically important cities like the technology hub at Bengaluru and at the largest commercial hub in Gujarat Province, Ahmedabad.[73] It established formal diplomatic relations with the Cook Islands and Niue. It opened commercial services offices in Bangladesh, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea. The State Department also reestablished a USAID mission in Fiji and elevated USAID's presence in Papua New Guinea to a Country Representative Office.[74]

Third, the Biden administration prioritized multilateral politico-diplomatic activities—energizing and expanding the limited number in existence at the beginning of the decade and generating others with strategic importance for balancing China across the region. In 2021, President Biden elevated the Quad grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States to the leader-level and saw that it met six times over the next 4 years, including at four Leaders' Summits. This generated multilateral strategic alignment and cooperative initiatives across the Indo-Pacific in the areas of maritime domain awareness, cybersecurity and technology, quality infrastructure, health security, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.[75]

Biden enhanced the U.S.–Japan–South Korea Trilateral Dialogue from one featuring loose coordination to one committed to proactive planning and consulting about responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats that affect collective interests and security.[76] It extended and enhanced trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and the Philippines, hosting the first-ever Leaders' Summit and coordinating American and Japanese investment and targeted assistance to the Philippines on critical technologies while strengthening interoperability and capability for Manila's maritime law enforcement and security operations in the face of PRC coercive activities.[77] President Biden also hosted two historic Pacific Islands Forum Summits at the White House and launched the first-ever U.S.-Pacific Partnership Strategy.[78] These set the conditions for new vigor in U.S.–Pacific Island economic and security programs including a Blue Pacific initiative in 2022 and an expanded National Guard State Partnership Program with Pacific Island countries.[79]

Biden administration activities demonstrably enhanced American diplomatic presence and energy across the Indo-Pacific region. Its Indo-Pacific strategy featured the most concerted post–Cold War effort to increase U.S. diplomatic presence in the region with new

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Embassies, consulates, comprehensive strategic partnerships, recurring high-level visits, and unique high-level gatherings in Washington. It also undertook reorganization within the State Department that focused on meeting the China challenge. Each had positive impact, increasing U.S. diplomatic capacity and orientation toward FOIP. Arguably, the Biden administration left America's network of regional diplomatic partnerships in excellent shape and perhaps their strongest posture ever.[80]

Biden administration diplomatic achievements, however, have yet to supplant China's superior ability to advance its regional strategic interests.[81] Moreover, the gains made were not indelible. Congress did not fully support many of them, failing to generate the consistent budgetary resources and oversight necessary for targeted and sustained growth of diplomatic personnel and activities across the Indo-Pacific.[82] The durability of these Indo-Pacific politico-diplomatic gains will be determined to a significant degree during a second Trump administration. Even though the first Trump administration's pursuit of unconventional bilateral initiatives like that with North Korea strained long-standing American Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships, they survived into 2020.[83] Trump 2.0 promises to pursue greater confrontation with China in a manner that should make sustained American bilateral and multilateral diplomatic partnerships very important. It remains to be seen if a second Trump administration will be interested in deepening an array of bilateral or multilateral diplomatic relationships including the maintenance of institutional scaffolding necessary for their sustainment. Such an approach could emerge if the administration chooses to evolve toward a more multilateral pattern than observed during the first Trump term.[84]

China. Beijing pursued a dual-track diplomatic strategy in Asia in the 2020s. On one track, China continued to strengthen its bilateral strategic partnerships and participation in multilateral forums to project an image of a reliable, beneficial, and stable partner, often explicitly contrasting its "inclusive" and "win-win" model with the U.S. system of alliances based on common democratic values and treaty-based defense commitments.[85] By contrast, China's strategic partnerships do not entail firm security guarantees but are based on practical exchanges in diverse areas, such as tourism, student exchanges, science and technology partnerships, trade and investment, and security cooperation. Head of state meetings are often the occasion for announcing new bilateral trade agreements. Sometimes the chief deliverable is an upgrade in the relationship itself. In 2024, for instance, Xi declared that China's relations with Bangladesh—a key partner in South Asia—would be elevated from a "strategic partnership" to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," indicating a higher diplomatic priority.[86]

Beijing also adopted a proactive attitude toward regional multilateral diplomacy. China hosts or participates in multilateral engagements such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, Western Pacific Naval Symposium, Shangri-La Dialogue, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Chinese participation in both bilateral and multilateral engagements diminished due to the pandemic but then resumed in 2023 with fanfare. In October, Xi hosted the third Belt and Road Forum, hosting heads of state from 20 countries. These venues are opportunities for Chinese diplomats not only to expound on messaging themes such as the "community of common destiny" but also to draw contrasts with the United States—both in terms of level of participation (China more frequently dispatches senior

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officials to regional meetings based on geographic proximity) and in terms of criticism of U.S. policies in the Indo-Pacific, which China tends to portray as provocative and redolent of a Cold War mindset. Complementing these activities was the promulgation of a Global Security Initiative, through which China promised support for global security governance and enlisted countries to support a Beijing-defined notion of respect for the "sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries."[87]

On another track, China continued a pattern of diplomatic confrontation with its rivals. The phenomenon of "wolf warrior diplomacy" began in the mid-2010s, when Chinese diplomats became more bellicose in criticizing the United States and other countries involved in territorial and political disputes. Some of the "wolf warriors" trained their attention on the United States itself, including spreading fictious rumors about the U.S. role in the origins of the COVID pandemic (likely to distract attention from Beijing's own mishandling of the situation). Beijing's more conciliatory policies toward the Philippines under the Rodrigo Duterte administration transitioned to bolder assertions of sovereignty in the Spratly's after the election in May 2022 of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., who tended to support closer alliance relations with the United States. In a sign of awareness of the counterproductive results of this hostility, Beijing began to rein in some of these brazen diplomats in the 2020s.[88]

Continued rule by the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan also meant that Beijing preferred to execute a coercive strategy toward the island. Chinese officials excoriated the government of former president Tsai Ing-wen on many occasions, often jointly criticizing the United States for providing support.[89] Tensions erupted in August 2022 when Tsai received U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and China responded with a mix of incendiary rhetoric, economic penalties, and military maneuvers. China was further aggravated in May 2024 when newly elected president William Lai delivered an inaugural address that appeared to support greater political separation between the mainland and Taiwan. An official from the mainland's Taiwan Affairs Office stated that Lai "wantonly advocated separatism, incited cross-strait confrontation, and sought independence by relying on foreign support and by force."[90] Chinese diplomats also encouraged others to support Beijing's "one China principle" and pressured Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic partners, including a handful of Pacific Island nations, to break ranks and recognize Beijing.

Although Chinese diplomacy attempted to keep these tracks separate, instances of wolf warrior diplomacy and escalating coercion against territorial rivals and Taiwan meant that China's image was mixed across Asia in the 2020s. The fallout from China's aggressive response to South Korea's 2017 decision to deploy a THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) battery over Beijing's objections continued into the next decade, when in 2024, 71 percent of South Korean respondents viewed China unfavorably, according to a Pew study.[91] Views in other rival countries, including Australia, India, Japan, and the Philippines, were also strongly negative toward China, even if Beijing hoped—on the first track—to try to weaken those countries' relations with the United States by leveraging the power of its markets. Nevertheless, Beijing performed better in many states across Southeast and South Asia, such as Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand where the voices of wolf warriors were not as pronounced and where citizens tended to view China more as an economic opportunity than as a security challenge.

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Russia. Russian diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region remains anchored in its desire to undermine the U.S. world order and disrupt American activities and relationships that perpetuate any preponderance of U.S. power.[92] Russia is unable to bring down this American-led world order on its own; therefore, Moscow aligns with other U.S. adversaries like Iran, China, and North Korea. Two of these—China and the North Korea—are in the Asia-Pacific region.[93] Russia's diplomatic resources in the region are relatively limited. But Moscow does work to assure that it retains voice and influence for its strategic interests along two lines of diplomatic effort: partnership with China in opposition to the U.S./West and balance in its regional friendships to help manage ties with a rising China in Moscow's vulnerable eastern regions.[94]

Long-serving Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov continued to argue in the early 2020s that the American FOIP strategy is not only about limiting China but rather part of a wider U.S. shift toward containing the world's two preeminent land powers—Russia and China.[95] Like Beijing, Moscow decries American global dominance and the promotion of "liberal values." It also needs Beijing to offset the extraordinary extent of Western sanctions that have isolated its economy from its long-standing integration into the global commercial system. The Sino-Russian alignment in the Indo-Pacific is one anchored around both a philosophical dislike for America and Russian economic necessity. Both factors are likely to extend beyond the cessation of overt hostilities in Ukraine.[96]

Yet deeper Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation is constrained by the threat to Russian markets from China's export-oriented economic model and by the impact of Moscow's self-image as a Euro-Pacific power on several key regional dynamics. Perhaps the most noteworthy factor is their divergent views about access to the Arctic via the Northwest Pacific Ocean. Beijing's approach to the Arctic Northern Sea Route (NSR) is at odds with Moscow's plans. China views this route as part of the joint Sino-Russian Polar Silk Road initiative, aiming to integrate it with its Xi's Belt and Road Initiative. Russia sees it as part of its own wider Eurasia framework incorporating India and perhaps Japan by linking the NSR with the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor. This divergence likely explains why Beijing has yet to support Russia's sovereignty claims over the NSR and has shown limited interest joining Russia's Vladivostok-centered plans.[97]

Russia complements its tight coupling with China against the United States with diplomatic relationships to help it manage vulnerabilities to China's rapidly growing power in Moscow's eastern backyard. Here, Moscow extended bilateral cooperation with India, North Korea, and Vietnam. The Russia-DPRK Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed in June 2024, provides Russia both with support for its war in Ukraine and with mechanisms for greater influence and agility in East Asia. The treaty is a de facto defense pact, but it appears to allow Moscow to refrain from direct involvement in North Korean border conflicts or skirmishes while simultaneously establishing a framework for North Korean support of Russia in Ukraine.[98] As North Korea's principal patron, Beijing is likely a bit wary of Pyongyang's efforts to cultivate new alternatives through closer military-political and trade-economic ties with Russia.[99]

Russia also sustains its long-term bilateral relationship with Vietnam despite frictions between Hanoi and Beijing. Putin inked 11 economic and security agreements during a June 2024 visit to Vietnam. Some of these supported Vietnamese oil and gas exploration

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ventures in some of the disputed areas of the South China Sea between China and Vietnam and could not have been viewed warmly in Beijing.[100] Finally, the Russia-India Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership is a long-standing and pragmatic framework coupling bilateral diplomatic, economic, and some historical military hardware relationships. This relationship has declined over the past half-decade as Sino-Russian relations grew larger. But India has not fully abandoned Russia despite New Delhi's enmity toward Beijing. Thus, India-Russia strategic relations remain a hedge for Moscow that could be reinvigorated under two circumstances that might accrue before the end of the 2020s. First, should India reach a broad rapprochement with China, including but not limited to their boundary dispute, it would allow space to rekindle a cordiale Russia-India-China grouping that existed in the early 2000s. Alternatively, should Russia and China experience a political break akin to the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s (coupled with a degree of Russian [or Chinese] rapprochement with the United States), it would enable New Delhi to revitalize relations with Moscow.[101]

Ideological and Informational Tools and Prospects

The United States. The U.S. FOIP rests on the American ideals of liberal democracy: a free trade system, respect for the rule of law, individual rights, freedom of navigation (including open shipping lanes), freedom of overflight, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and transparency in the free flow of information. During the early 2020s, America's FOIP vision continued to demonstrate region-wide appeal, appearing in language incorporated into many bilateral and multilateral treaties and partnerships as these were enhanced and expanded during the Biden administration. Moreover, America's ability to influence regional public opinion through cultural appeal and interaction—measured in terms of cultural projection, information flows, and people exchanges—remained high and by a wide margin over China.[102]

American culture and social engagement remained robust across the Indo-Pacific region. American media outlets and universities remained appealing. The United States was the most favored location for regional pursuit of graduate and tertiary education. East Asia and the Pacific sent the most international students to the United States among the six regions of the world, comprising more than 41 percent of the total in academic year (AY) 2023, 2.7 percent more than in AY 2022.[103] Among this cohort, Chinese students remained the largest national group from the region and globally during AY 2023 although their absolute numbers dropped from highs in AY 2020.[104] Then in AY 2024, India surpassed China as the overall largest source of U.S. international students.[105] The attractiveness of U.S. higher education and associated culture continued to outpace that of China throughout the Indo-Pacific, as China first wrestled with its COVID-19 lockdown and then confronted a major downturn in the number of international students from developed countries.[106] The size of America's regional diaspora and the attractiveness of America as a travel and emigration destination also enhanced U.S. regional influence far in excess of that enjoyed by China.[107]

American cultural influences and exports—including the regional status of U.S. cultural services, passports, cultural sites, and global brands—sustained their long-standing regional dominance over China across all regional states.[108] English remained the language

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of business and people-to-people interactions across the Indo-Pacific region. Australia, India, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Singapore are either English speaking or recognize English as an official language.[109] Although China's people-to-people links in the region continued to exceed those of the United States, the proliferation of Americans and Americanisms across the region gave the United States a decided advantage in promulgating its ideological viewpoint and ideas.[110] Only in China did the appeal of American culture notably declined during the early 2020s. The growing animus between Beijing and Washington spilled into what had been a legacy of goodwill between the Chinese people and American culture. American commercial brands and social norms were largely replaced by "China chic" during the first half decade of the 2020s.[111]

Mechanisms for U.S. promulgation of its ideology and societal values across the Indo-Pacific region continued to ride on the backbone of public discourse and commercial media, including via social media conveyed mainly through undersea cables and satellite interface. Regional media access remained bifurcated. The "Great Wall of China" continued to isolate PRC citizens from the media penetrating the rest of the Indo-Pacific largely affiliated with U.S. and Western platforms and information standards. Leading Western social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and X, remained banned in China while Beijing approved alternatives like WeChat and Douyin (Chinese-only TikTok) blanket the information space while rejecting Western norms and censoring U.S./Western narratives.[112]

Beyond China, U.S.-origin social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and X controlled information flows across the region including in India, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand.[113] Messenger applications like LINE (Japan and Thailand) and Kakaotalk (South Korea) dominated in their respective countries and largely adhered to the privacy and personal protection protocols standard across the Western world. U.S. State Department regional Embassy accounts on these sites, along with local cable and television providers, promulgated American narratives and talking points but without noteworthy penetration or resonance. In general, American norms and practices for information exchange and messaging relied on the general popularity of commercial American media and social messaging beyond the direct control of the U.S. Government.

The Indo-Pacific region has one of the world's greatest concentrations of undersea communications cables, with 139 publicly disclosed submarine cables and at least 15 in development at mid-decade.[114] This network became an increasing concern for the United States and its regional strategic partners in the early 2020s. On one hand, Sino-Western tensions made the network more vulnerable to strategically motivated sabotage. On the other, competition over undersea cable primacy became ever-more important as China and the U.S./West jousted over which side's equipment, norms, and data management procedures would dominate the Indo-Pacific information space.

In February 2022, the Matsu Islands (governed by Taiwan) had its two cables cut by Chinese vessels resulting in its entire population of 11,800 people largely cut off from the Internet for 50 days. Since 2017, Matsu Islands' cables had been disrupted 30 times, with at least a third of those disruptions caused by Chinese vessels (although these never were determined to be an intentional act by the PRC). Similar incidents happened off the coast of Taiwan.[115] If the PRC chose to escalate tensions with Taiwan, cutting its undersea cables

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could choke off the island's communication. As a result, Taiwan announced at mid-decade an estimated US$18 million to purchase 700 satellite stations as a contingency for cable disruption. In September 2024, Singapore commissioned two new submarines to protect its underwater cables.[116] Vietnam had similar concerns regarding potential Chinese destruction of undersea cables servicing Vietnam through the disputed South China Sea.[117]

The ownership and oversight of cables is also increasingly contested. China's HMN Tech (previously Huawei Marine Networks) has led Chinese efforts to attain strategic advantage by laying an expansive array of undersea cables for smaller, strategically important Indo-Pacific countries. These efforts inspired Australia, Japan, and the U.S. intervention in the late 2010s and early 2020s to redirect cable landings and outbid Chinese companies for control of strategically vital undersea cable lines.[118] Increasingly, U.S.-led collective-security measures for submarine cables are becoming more critical across the Indo-Pacific. The Quad declared a Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience with the objective of assisting regional cable maintenance. It also set technical standards and funding mechanisms to assist the states of the Indo-Pacific generate reliable and resilient "clean" undersea cable networks free from Chinese technologies.[119] Reportedly, the United States began lobbying hard across the region to dissuade countries from opting for Chinese suppliers, with Vietnam as a most conspicuous recent example.[120] During the early 2020s, the United States and its regional partners began taking deliberate steps to reduce the risks from geostrategic rivalry in the highly vulnerable and critical venue of cyberspace undersea communications cables.[121]

China. Under Xi's leadership, the CCP has promoted an ideological vision rooted in "socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era."[122] In this vision, growth rates would need to be sustained but economic results should be more equitably distributed, environmental challenges linked to climate change would be addressed, and the standard of living for ordinary citizens would lifted to the level of a "medium-level developed country" by 2035.[123] The party would reaffirm its Marxist roots while adhering to governance in which society is strictly governed by a small and unchallenged elite; independent civil society or criticism of the regime would be suppressed. During his tenure, Xi has added various supporting concepts to this general policy. In 2023, he announced the idea of "new quality productive forces," driven by a focus on gaining advantages in "future industries," such as nuclear fusion, deep-sea mining, robotics, and genetic engineering.[124] Innovations would not be driven mainly by private entrepreneurs but by elaborate state planning and partnerships between the public and private sectors.

In promulgating its distinct governance system, Beijing attempts to draw favorable contrasts with Western liberal diplomacy. In China's strategic messaging, the United States is often described as a declining hegemon, exhausted by decades of military adventurism, unsustainable budgets, and internal social and political discord. The United States, as presented in the Chinese narrative, is therefore no longer a model worth emulating. The alternative model, as demonstrated its most successful form by China, underscores what is sometimes discussed as "changes unseen in a century"—referring to a multipolarization of the international order rooted in the rise of the techno-authoritarianism that Xi appears to believe is better adapted to addressing 21st-century challenges. Projecting an image of au-

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thoritarian solidarity, Xi repeated the mantra of "changes unseen in a century" at a meeting with Vladimir Putin in March 2023, before adding, "let's drive those changes together."[125]

Nevertheless, for an Indo-Pacific audience, the attractiveness of China's model varies across different regimes. Democracies such as Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan recognize that an embrace of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" requires strict authoritarian governance, symbolized by China's own surveillance state, which if emulated would require unacceptable sacrifices in civil and political liberties. The crackdown on democratic freedoms in Hong Kong in 2020 was interpreted as a cautionary tale in Taiwan, where a reconfiguration of governance on China's terms would be anathema to hard-won democratic liberties. Authoritarian-leaning countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, or Vietnam may have fewer concerns about restricted personal freedoms and view Beijing as not only a model but also a top partner in acquiring the technological tools necessary to build up their own social control capabilities. China, for some, has begun to emerge as an internal security partner of choice, even if they still look to the United States as an external partner.[126]

Even for less democratic regimes, though, China's ideological attractiveness must be measured against actual performance. China's poor handling of the COVID pandemic, combined with its economic slowdown, was a sign that the Chinese system can make bold—but unwise—decisions. By contrast, the United States was perhaps slow to mobilize at the outset of the pandemic but then gradually mobilized pandemic aid to partners across the Indo-Pacific and reopened to business and tourists much more quickly than China. There is also a broader recognition that China is beset by profound governance challenges, including heavy debt burdens, official corruption, and environmental deterioration, that the party has not been able to successfully manage. A mature democracy's ability to correct course was a sign for regimes focused mainly on performance that centralization of power in the hands of a single party, and in China a single leader, comes with a similar risk of strategic failure.

Russia. Despite its mid-decade travails in Ukraine and its extensive dependence on China to survive in the face of a major war and enormous global economic sanctions, Russia still harbors hopes that its vision of a "Greater Eurasia" might yet take hold. In this vision, China would be a key ally for Russia in the development of a new "greater Eurasian community." Russia will embrace new Chinese investment in transport and other infrastructure projects, using China's Belt and Road Initiative as a way of shifting the focus of Russia's development from the European part of Russia to Siberia and the Far East but without capitulating control to Xi.[127] In this vision, China might be the economic leader, but not a hegemon, because within a Greater Eurasian partnership "Beijing will be balanced by Moscow, Delhi, Tokyo, Seoul, Teheran, Jakarta, and Manila."[128]

At mid-decade, there is no evidence that this vision has any traction with Moscow's putative partners, much less in Beijing. Instead, Russia's bloody 3-year war in Ukraine appalled those in the Indo-Pacific like Japan, who once harbored ideas about a somewhat closer relationship with Russia to balance China. Similarly, Putin's turn to North Korea for weapons and manpower to prosecute the Ukrainian war provoked Japan, and especially South Korea, to consider contribution of lethal military assistance to Ukraine's fight against

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Moscow.[129] Whatever aspirations Putin may retain for a Greater Eurasia tethered to Russia as its leading Euro-Pacific power will require several years to establish.

Well before the 2020s, Russia reportedly assisted North Korean cyber-espionage and criminal activities against the United States and the West.[130] By the mid-2020s, Western criticism of this kind of Russian-assisted global communications subterfuge was joined by a new concern—that Russian worldwide espionage efforts to disrupt and destroy Western undersea communication cables could be attempted in the Indo-Pacific.[131] In late 2024, a Belize-flagged Russian cargo vessel stopped for a short period of time in South Korea and then loitered off Taiwan's coast on for several days. This pattern mimicked patterns observed by Chinese and Russian cargo ships accused of dragging an anchor to damage Western communications cables in the Baltic Sea in 2023 and 2024 incidents. Russian participation in western Pacific acts of espionage or sabotage against Western communications cables and infrastructure threatened a new combination with China capable of either disrupting normal peacetime information exchanges between Western states or cutting off Western partners from effective communications during times of crisis or direct clash with China.[132] Thus, the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners will need to confront the prospect of malign Russian actions in support of China and against important information networks in the event of a regional clash.

Military Tools and Prospects and the Hard Case of Taiwan

The United States. Between 2020 and 2024, U.S. military posture across the Indo-Pacific region changed in important ways. In quantitative terms, America's absolute number of forward forces increased a bit, but its relative size declined in the face of China's historic military buildup. It also lost relative qualitative superiority in several technical areas including missile systems, air-denial capabilities, and communications dominance. At the same time, the United States made historic and strategically significant changes to its force posture, alliance structures, and strategic partnerships. The Biden administration expanded and extended its network of military alliances, strategic partnerships, and technological arrangements with allies and friendly partners in the Indo-Pacific to better support land, sea, air, cyber, and outer space access and freedom of maneuver across the theater. At mid-decade, the relative regional military balance between relative U.S. and Chinese capabilities made it difficult for China to forcibly consolidate sovereign control over the four major disputed areas of Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Himalayas for at least the next 5 years.[133] However, the accelerating Sino-American military buildup was aggravating the prospect of accidental armed incident leading to wider, undesirable direct armed clash.

By 2025, the U.S. military enjoyed fewer quantitative and qualitative advantages over the PLA than it did in 2020.[134] U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) maintained at least 66 significant defense sites spread across the region from Hawaii in the East, Japan in the North, north and western Australia in the South, and Diego Garcia of the Indian Ocean in the West.[135] USINDOPACOM oversaw a permanent regional presence of approximately 200 ships including 5 aircraft carrier strike groups; 2,000 fighter, bomber and mobility aircraft; 1 Army corps headquarters and two divisions totaling 106,000 personnel; 2 Marine Expeditionary Forces with about 86,000 personnel; and access to another 100,000 deploy-

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able troops on command from the continental United States if required.[136] These numbers grew some 10 to 15 percent across the Indo-Pacific from 2020. But they were not as significant as the significant dispersion and reorganization of U.S. military assets undertaken there in the early 2020s.

The Biden administration dramatically reorganized America's regional architecture and warfighting doctrine to employ unmanned warfighting systems; space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and cyber capabilities and logistics hubs to support its ground, air, and naval assets. These moves meant to counter the worrisome growth in Chinese military assets—especially long-range PLA missiles that had attained the range and mass capable of simultaneous decapitating strikes on traditional finite U.S. military bases and ports.[137] The Biden administration prioritized regional military restructuring of U.S. and partner assets for dispersion and hardening necessary to assure robust allied military presence and influence short of armed conflict and (if necessary) warfighting capabilities against growing Chinese military threats inside the region's First Island Chain (see figure 9.2).[138]

By 2024, USINDOPACOM, working alongside regional allies and partners, made U.S. force posture in the Indo-Pacific region dramatically more mobile, distributed, resilient against Chinese preemptive attack, and lethal in the event of future armed hostilities. In Japan, its northern boundary, the command added a U.S. Marine Littoral Regiment and a U.S. watercraft unit. It accelerated joint military exercises and training to counter Chinese regional aggression.[139] It also integrated the early warning and space situational awareness systems of the United States with those of South Korea and Japan necessary for trilateral joint and integrated air and missile defense as well as counterspace capabilities.[140]

In the southern Pacific, the command took several steps with Australia to augment land, sea, and air mobility and lethality. It made more and longer expeditionary U.S. submarine visits (linked to the AUKUS deal), increased rotations of U.S. bombers and fighters, expanded maritime and ground forces cooperation, and enhanced space and logistics cooperation. It also invested in a series of construction upgrades to key U.S.-Australia air bases in the northwest of the continent and set the conditions for the creation of formal U.S. Submarine Rotational Force–West in Australia by 2027. In the center of the Pacific, USINDOPACOM significantly expanded U.S. rotational access across the Philippines, designating four new sites on Manila's islands as U.S. strategic locations for expanded logistics access and joint military training to enhance the interoperability of U.S. and Philippines armed forces. It also enhanced joint military exercises with critical regional partners in India, Indonesia, and Malaysia and concluded an inaugural Defense Cooperation Agreement with Papua New Guinea, a vital military outpost that had been increasingly wooed by China.[141]

The Biden administration also prioritized support for the deployment of advanced U.S. military capabilities in the region and made significant financial investments in allies and partner defense capabilities to assure complementary weapons systems and doctrine. With congressional support, it committed over US$10 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative. It announced and then established a pathway for Australia to acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered U.S. and United Kingdom standard submarines through the AUKUS pro-

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gram. It also agreed with Australia to coproduce Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems by mid-decade.

The Biden administration supported Japan's reinterpretation of its constitution to provide for greater exercise of limited collective defense. It applauded Tokyo's adoption of enhanced peace and security legislation doubling Japan's defense budget to develop its own military research, testing, and industrial expertise and programs. Washington then supported Japan's acquisition of the U.S. Tomahawk Land Attack Missile and Tokyo's desire to develop an indigenous program to produce Tomahawks in the future. The Biden administration also prioritized joint defense investments with India. It developed a Roadmap for U.S.-India Defense Industrial Cooperation to coproduce fighter jet engines and Stryker armored vehicles and launched an India-U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem to promote partnerships between U.S. and Indian defense researchers, entrepreneurs, and investors.[142]

These and an array of other U.S. military force posture and defense interoperability initiatives across the Indo-Pacific in the early 2020s demonstrably improved U.S. force posture, credible operational presence, and warfighting capacity. The United States and its regional security partners entered the mid-2020s better postured to survive and operate in the face of massive Chinese investments in long-range conventional missiles, advanced surface-to-air missiles, antiship cruise and ballistic missiles, antiaccess/area denial systems, antisatellite capabilities, and cyber intelligence–gathering and –strike assets. American defense of its allies and national interests inside the western Pacific's First Island Chain remained a great challenge given China's geographic advantage when operating from its nearby home territory but was less daunting than they appeared at the beginning of the decade.

A potential U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan remained the true hard case for U.S. military forces in the Indo-Pacific region. China considers Taiwan part of its historic territory and is resolved to eventually achieve unification as part of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The United States does not have a formal security commitment to Taiwan, but the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act requires Washington to provide Taiwan with defensive arms and states that U.S. policy is to retain the capability to resist the use of force or coercion to undermine Taiwan's security. Experts believe that China could feel compelled to use force against Taiwan if the island's leadership were to threaten to declare independence or to take other steps deemed in Beijing as jeopardizing an inevitable reunification on PRC terms. On multiple occasions during his term in office, President Biden stated that the United States would send American troops should China attempt to reunify Taiwan by force.[143] President Trump has never made such a declaration, instead suggesting while a candidate that Taiwan should pay more to the United States for its security support and that the PRC would suffer negative economic consequences if it invaded Taiwan.[144]

Former USINDOPACOM commander, Admiral Philip Davidson, testified before Congress in 2021 that his professional assessment was that the PLA was under directive to be ready to invade Taiwan in 2027 and that it would be ready to execute that order.[145] Citing the major changes made to American force posture and alliance interoperability in the early 2020s, successive USINDOPACOM commanders Admiral John Aquilino and Admiral Samuel Paparo both stated that any Chinese attempt to invade Taiwan would be met by a "Hellscape."[146] They described Hellscape as a battlespace filled with tens of thousands of unmanned ships, aircraft, and submarines all working in tandem to engage thousands of

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targets in the constrained space of the Taiwan Strait and with supporting missions against the PLA assets all across the vast span of the western Pacific.[147]

The Biden administration also took noteworthy albeit nascent steps to help Taiwan harden itself against PLA invasion—making the island difficult to swallow and even harder to digest. In this case, there remained work to do for the state of Taiwan's, and territorial defense forces were overall quite poor and badly lagging in comparison to its own navy and air force. In late 2024, the Biden administration gave Taiwan US$80 million in defense equipment—a rare conveyance of foreign military equipment without any reciprocal payment. The administration also created an authorization for another US$500 million in military sales and encouraged Taiwanese procurement. Biden opened the door for Taiwan to send two of its battalions to the United States for training in 2025—a first since the 1970s back when the Nation still recognized Taiwan as its own sovereign entity. U.S. trainers were authorized to enter Taipei to embed with its marines and special forces.[148]

Undaunted, China reportedly pressed forward with the development of military equipment and capabilities necessary to commence a cross-Strait invasion if directed before 2030.[149] Yet it is hard to know if China would be willing to risk the high costs in manpower, material, and regional disruption necessary to pursue an invasion in the face of a Hellscape and an island armed to the teeth. Multiple war games in Western think tanks about Taiwan reinforce the fact that conducting an opposed amphibious or airborne assault would be at least as hazardous and unforgiving on the PLA as all other participants. Losses for all involved would be significant and, in most simulation runs, Taiwan maintained the status quo although with extraordinary infrastructure and economic damage.[150]

But the PRC may not have to invade to achieve its main aims before 2030. Beijing might opt for an air and maritime blockade or quarantine of Taiwan as an alternative approach to any move by Taipei to assert autonomy and to coerce Taiwan's assimilation into the PRC.[151] Between 2022 and 2024, the PLA conducted a sequence of synchronized military exercises and force presence activities simulating a quarantine or blockade of the island (see figure 9.2).[152]

If the PRC used its coast guard and civilian law enforcement to conduct a quarantine, the United States and its regional partners would not have sufficient coast guard forces to respond in kind. The American use of naval assets to help Taiwan respond to risks the negative optics of American escalation from a nonmilitary policing event to one pushed into an overtly military one. It is also uncertain that any U.S. Indo-Pacific allies would join in a military effort to break a quarantine if the PRC managed it in a limited manner and did not appear threatening to regional economic activity. This may leave the United States reluctant to intervene militarily to defend Taiwan from a quarantine.[153]

If Beijing's goal is to inflict enough pain to force Taiwan's unconditional surrender to the PRC, then a quarantine might be insufficient, and China might need an overt military blockade to both exert more pressure and set the conditions for an all-out invasion.[154] But it seems more likely that, although noteworthy, American efforts to reframe its Indo-Pacific military footprint and alliance structure in the early 2020s may slow Chinese intimidation activities in the East and South China seas and give the PRC more pause about undertaking a military invasion or a heavy-handed blockade of Taiwan this decade. American military

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improvements may not yet be enough to deter PRC efforts to further isolate and intimidate Taipei with application of a quarantine.[155]

China. Under Xi Jinping, the PLA has undergone a significant expansion of both its conventional and strategic capabilities, which provide China's leaders with the capabilities to post increasing challenges to U.S. interests throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Underwritten by the world's largest shipbuilding capacity, the PLA Navy grew from 271 to 328 ships from 2012 and 2024, while the total U.S. Navy battle force only grew from 284 to 289 during the same period.[156] China's expansion includes major surface combatants such as the *Luyang III*-class destroyer and *Renhai*-class cruiser as well large amphibious ships. A third indigenously designed aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, was launched in 2024. There has also been a rapid increase in the PLA Air Force's fifth-generation fighter, the J-20, which numbered more than 140 in 2024 and was deployed to all five of the PLA's theater commands. China has also fielded a modern bomber, the H-6N, and is set to release its next generation bomber, the H-20.

China's strategic arsenal continues to expand. The PLA Rocket Force, responsible for China's land-based nuclear and conventional missiles, has deployed new long-range precision-strike weapons, including medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles fitted with hypersonic glide vehicles. These are designed to evade U.S. missile defenses and pose risks to U.S. bases as far as Guam. Of note, China's nuclear forces embarked on a historic expansion under Xi, underscored by the revelation of hundreds of new intercontinental ballistic missile silos in western China. The U.S. Department of Defense estimated that by 2023 China's nuclear warhead stockpile had surpassed 600 and was on track to reach 1,000 by 2035.[157] Nuclear-capable bombers and ballistic missiles submarines, based in the South China Sea and fitted with long-range missiles able to reach the continental United States, completed a nuclear triad. Meanwhile, the PLA made continued investments in cyber, space, and counter-space weapons.

Military modernization in the Xi era complemented upgrades in organization, training, and doctrine.[158] Xi's signature achievement was a massive reorganization that focused on the creation of a modern command and control system. Five theaters commanders now have peacetime authority over land, sea, air, and conventional missile forces, which promotes joint planning, training, and operations. Xi and his advisers, aware that the lack of combat experience remains a core PLA weakness, have promoted changes to make training more realistic.[159] This includes a greater emphasis on combined arms, opposition force, nighttime, and long-distance training. Based on the advent of new technologies and a new organizational structure, the PLA in 2020 began to update its joint doctrine, which includes campaigns relevant to cross-Strait and other contingencies such as island landings, blockades, and firepower strikes.

A modernizing PLA, along with China's Coast Guard and other paramilitary services, was used in the early 2020s to intimidate rivals, including the United States. Intimidation tactics, often referred to as gray-zone coercion, came in several varieties. China continued to build infrastructure and move troops into contested areas, such as the Aksai Chin region also claimed by India. Air and naval assets also continued to conduct patrols in sensitive regions, often using aggressive tactics to compel rival claimants to reduce their own presence. In the South China Sea, the Second Thomas Shoal, claimed by China and the Philippines,

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became the site of intense contestation in 2024, when Beijing dispatched PLA Navy and Coast Guard ships to disrupt the resupply of a small contingent of Filipino marines. PLA aviators also conducted dozens of "unsafe and unprofessional" intercepts of U.S. and allied aircraft in international airspace above the East and South China seas to raise the stakes for foreign military operations in China's near abroad.[160] Still, as in the previous decade, Beijing was hesitant to escalate tensions above the level of lethal violence, suggesting that regional stability remained a priority.

Despite China's focus on gray zone coercion, the PLA continued to hone its preparations for a major conflict across the Taiwan Strait. Foreign observers, citing Xi's reported instructions to the PLA to be prepared for conflict by 2027, debated the likelihood, and likely results, of a war. Attention piqued after August 2022, when in response to a brief visit to Taiwan by then U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, the PLA staged a series of military demonstrations that included ballistic missile tests, live-fire maneuvers in waters around Taiwan, and fighter aircraft incursions across the midline of the Taiwan Strait, which had long been considered an informal boundary between the two sides. Some analysts saw Xi preparing for an invasion following in the footsteps of Russia's Putin, who 6 months earlier launched his own revanchist campaign in Ukraine. Others thought that Xi and additional Chinese leaders may have been dissuaded by fears of Western sanctions, Russia's poor performance on the ground in Ukraine, and lingering deficits in the PLA, including a widespread corruption scandal that came to light in 2023.

While observers lacked direct insight into Xi's calculus, it was likely the case that Chinese decisionmakers continued to debate how best to deter U.S. intervention in any Taiwan conflict. Participation by U.S. forces, as evidenced in various wargames, is a critical factor that could determine whether and at what costs the PLA could prevail against Taiwan. At the 20th Party Congress in October 2023, Xi articulated a goal of building a "strong system of strategic deterrence," which coincided with and alluded to the ongoing expansion of China's nuclear forces—and which could function as a type of shield designed to minimize foreign intervention in any Indo-Pacific conflict.[161] Xi may have been emboldened in this respect from Putin's apparently successful employment of nuclear coercion to limit NATO involvement in Ukraine. However, the PLA was also building the long-range strike weapons, as well as nonkinetic capabilities such as cyber and electronic warfare tools, to delay or disrupt U.S. mobilization if "strategic deterrence" could not be attained.

Russia. At mid-decade, Russia's military presence in the Indo-Pacific region was comparatively spartan but strategically relevant and notably active. Never extensive, Russia's Far Eastern ground forces hit a low ebb in 2024. From 2023 to 2024, Moscow moved several of its army, naval infantry, and air forces units from Far Eastern district into the Ukraine combat zone, and many became casualties that Moscow could not replace. Its Pacific Fleet also lacked general-purpose naval forces: submarines, surface ships, and aviation.[162] Yet at the same time, Russian navy and long-range aviation accelerated regional joint military naval and aerial exercises with the PLA, demonstrating its continuing in opposition to the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies and partners.

China and Russia have conducted joint naval exercises since 2012, most of which were in the Western Pacific. After 2022, their bilateral military exercises at sea and in the air accelerated.[163] The sensitive locations of many of their joint exercises suggested political

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signaling. Joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea may have been intended to express displeasure with U.S.–South Korea joint naval exercises. Joint naval exercises in the East China Sea, where China has declared an air defense identification zone and has a maritime territorial dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands, and those in the South China Sea, where China makes expansive claims in defiance of an international tribunal's ruling, were small and mainly symbolic in nature. Russia-China joint military drills also deliberately entered the U.S. air defense identification zone—coming as close as 200 miles off Alaska's coast during their eighth joint aerial patrol in 2024. Weeks after China joined Russia in flying near Alaska, China's Coast Guard announced it had entered Arctic Ocean waters for the first time in a joint patrol conducted with Russian forces (see figure 9.3).

The optics of these Sino-Russian military exercises were worrisome, but their military significance remained debatable. Despite increasing scope and scale, these exercises mostly indicated "parallel play" without the kind of interoperability necessary to forecast effective joint military operations between the Russian military and the PLA in an intense combat environment. As of mid-decade, the two militaries lacked the capability to conduct joint operations, a situation that is unlikely to change soon. As noted elsewhere in this chapter, both countries view themselves as independent Great Powers and may therefore be unlikely to seek the kind of interoperability that U.S. and allied militaries have established.[164]

It is hard to imagine joint Sino-Russian military operations in the event of a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or the East China Sea before the end of the decade. Russia would be more likely to engage in parallel military action in separate sectors. For example, Russia could complicate matters for the U.S.-Japan alliance by setting up its own defensive air patrols in Northeast Asia, justifying them as homeland defense actions.[165] This could create sanctuaries for Chinese offensive power, distract Japanese forces, tap Japanese resources, and prevent the United States from establishing air and naval superiority by denying it secure access to important positions in Japan vital to a conflict in Taiwan or the Korean Peninsula. Even more likely, Russia could serve as a strategic support base for China during an armed clash. It could provide China with additional energy resources in the event of U.S. Navy interdiction of China's seaborne oil and liquefied natural gas with a blockade in the Strait of Malacca. It could conduct cyberattacks against U.S. military logistics or infrastructure. It might also provide weapons and technical assistance for the PLA.[166]

During the early 2020s, and despite enormous challenges in Ukraine, Russia still persisted with modernization of its Far East strategic maritime forces both to sustain global geostrategic presence and to safeguard Russian sovereign regional interests in Asia and in the Arctic region.[167] Putin worked to assure that the Pacific Fleet got the most advanced Russian nuclear ballistic submarines, fielding the new *Borei*-class boats there beginning in 2022 and continuing the flow of *Borei*s to replace up to five aged *Delta III*–class submarines before the end of the decade. The three *Borei*s fielded by 2024 reportedly made more frequent and lengthy patrol deployments than witnessed in many years, suggesting that the Pacific Fleet's ballistic nuclear submarine fleet soon will rival that of the long-superior Northern Fleet and shifting Russia's seaborne strategic nuclear deterrence center of gravity from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

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Japanese experts reported that Russia's special mission nuclear submarine *Belgorod* (Project 09852), equipped with the Poseidon nuclear-powered unmanned underwater system, would be deployed to Kamchatka before the end of the decade and tasked with surveying critical underwater infrastructure, such as submarine cables, in preparation to disrupt or damage them.[168] Beginning in the early 2020s, Moscow upgraded its Pacific-based surface ships and submarines with the Kalibr missile. Over the same period, it built antiship and air/missile defense batteries on the disputed Kuril Islands and at other locations in the region. Moscow even suggested that it might establish a new heavy bomber regiment in the theater before the end of the decade.[169]

In all, Russia's military footprint in the northern Indo-Pacific demonstrated that despite quantitative deficiencies and the loss of operational forces to the fight in Ukraine, Moscow remained keen to demonstrate its geostrategic relevance across the Indo-Pacific and at the eastern entry into the Arctic with a modernizing, active, and integrated military footprint linked to China but not beholden to it.

Economic Tools and Prospects

The Indo-Pacific region is home to many of the world's most dynamic economies. It accounts for more than half of global trade, middle-class households, manufacturing value added, and gross domestic product (GDP) growth.[170] This makes regional value chains important globally despite the growing geopolitical risks there tied to intensifying Sino-American Great Power competition. Most Indo-Pacific economies are export-based and rely on trade and investment exchange with China. Thus, China maintained a much superior capacity to that of the United States for regional influence through the exploitation of economic interdependencies.[171]

From the onset of a U.S.-China trade war in 2018 through 2023, trade between the United States and China fell. At the same time, ASEAN emerged as a kind of way station between these two economies with member state imports from China surging and their exports increasingly heading to the United States.[172] Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand benefited from this dynamic. Vietnam was a conspicuous case in point, as the value of its imports from China rose US$50 billion the same time its exports to the United States increased by US$60 billion.[173] Along the Indo-Pacific southern periphery, India's commercial profile evolved during the early 2020s in important ways. First, its trade with Russia expanded with 12-fold increase in imports of energy resources. It also increased exports like electronics, pharmaceuticals, rubber, and plastics to both Europe and the United States.

American and Western investment patterns in the Indo-Pacific changed in noteworthy ways during the early 2020s. Announced investment into China fell by more than 60 percent in 2022–2023 compared to pre-pandemic averages.[174] At the same time, global investments into India increased by about 35 percent, and foreign direct investment into ASEAN grew by 10 percent. Growing investment into India was noteworthy as it targeted longtime Chinese primary export sectors such as health care and pharmaceuticals, consumer-related industries, and technology.[175]

The United States. Relative American economic decline in the Indo-Pacific continued in the early 2020s as China's dominance persisted. The Asian Development Bank's 2023 report on regional integration showed that China's share of Asian merchandise rose from 10.3

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percent to 16.7 percent over a 20-year period with that gain mirroring a similar percentage decline in U.S. regional trade from 20.7 percent to 13.2 percent.[176] China's share of trade with the countries of ASEAN grew significantly in the early 2020s, anchoring China as ASEAN's dominant economic partner by mid-decade.[177] Despite this long-term trend, regional access to U.S. market and U.S. technology continued to play a major role in sustaining its growth and dynamism. Also, reciprocal American access to growing Indo-Pacific markets and technology remained important for U.S. growth and prosperity.

Indo-Pacific comparative economic trends in the early 2020s displayed patterns less favorable to China than pre-COVID ones. Much of this had to do with the growing overlay of security concerns onto regional economic activities. South Korea's exports to the United States and Japan overtook those to China in 2023 for the first time since 2006. ROK changes were driven by China's own push for self-reliance, Seoul's concerns about China's growing economic coercion, and new U.S. industrial policies—the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act—that led to a surge in exports of investment-related products from South Korea to the United States.[178]

China remained Japan's largest trading partner, but Tokyo used the early 2020s to posture itself for less future economic interaction with Beijing. In 2020, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry introduced measures to help Japanese companies shift production from China to Southeast Asia or Japan. Then, in 2022, Japan enacted a far-reaching Economic Security Promotion Act clarifying Japan's understanding of economic security and establishing critical supply chains and manufactured goods to be excluded from Sino-Japanese exchange. Japan used this act to join the United States and the Netherlands by tightening export restrictions on technologies related to semiconductors and quantum computing.[179]

Finally, India's economic interactions with the United States and China indicated an emergent new framework. In fiscal year 2024, India's overall goods trade with the America reached US$120 billion and it was US$118 billion with China. But India had a trade surplus of US$35.3 billion with the United States driven by robust export growth while its trade deficit with China surged to US$85.1 billion, the largest with any trading partner. India's exports to the United States saw growth across sectors like machinery, pharmaceuticals, electronics, and semiconductors. In contrast, New Delhi's mainly raw material and component exports to China largely stagnated despite doubling imports.[180]

U.S. economic activity across the Indo-Pacific during the early 2020s emphasized greater economic prosperity by addressing the region's infrastructure funding gap and providing alternatives to China's enormous, multidecade investments.[181] The Biden administration encouraged US$50 billion of U.S. private sector investment into regional economies to drive inclusive, sustainable, and resilient growth. It prioritized infrastructure projects, including ports, energy, rail, and digital infrastructure. It launched the Luzon Economic Corridor, a G-7-funded Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, with the Philippines and Japan to improve regional transportation, energy, and digital connectivity in the Philippines, fund million in undersea cables projects, and invest in Sri Lanka's Colombo port—South Asia's busiest transshipment hub.[182]

The administration also made "mini-deals" based on executive orders that sidestepped Congress with Japan and Vietnam in limited trading sectors. Simultaneously, it encouraged

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greater U.S. leadership in private investment with an array of other states. Among the most noteworthy of these other economic deals were trade and investment programs partnered with Taiwan and South Korea giving preference to their roles in secure supply chains for advanced semiconductors—a process prioritizing the de-risking of advanced semiconductor technology away from the PRC.[183] Another vital economic initiative was the U.S.-India Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET). Launched in early 2023, iCET was a bilateral economic agreement featuring strategic technology partnership and defense industrial cooperation among government agencies, private businesses, and academic institutions of the two countries.[184] It aimed for breakthrough achievements in priority critical and emerging technology areas by focused coproduction, co-development, and research and development activities at the leading edge of innovation. iCET aimed to deliver secure, reliable, and cost-competitive technology solutions for the United States, India, and its strategic partners around the world.[185] A trilateral technology dialogue among India, the United States, and the Republic of Korea was announced under the iCET framework, and its first meeting in Seoul took place in March 2024.[186]

However, when it came to comprehensive regional trade relations, the Biden team largely relied on the 2022 initiative known as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Including the United States and 13 regional partners, IPEF aspired to foster greater trade ties, strengthen supply chain resilience, facilitate public and private investments in infrastructure, and promote a fair and predictable business environment.[187] But in line with the reluctance of both American political parties to provoke a toxic national response from arrangements promising greater foreign economic access to the U.S. markets, the IPEF explicitly excluded market access from negotiations. Without trade as an incentive, IPEF members were understandably hesitant to commit to costly reforms related to issues like climate change or worker protections. This rendered economic agreements in the IPEF group of 14 participants (13 plus the United States) mostly aspirational and without credible enforcement mechanisms. The IPEF trade pillar notably exclude tariff reductions as a topic for discussions, and then the United States pulled out of IPEF trade negotiations totally as the American Presidential race heated up in late 2023.[188]

Washington's reliance on the IPEF spotlighted its decision to keep America away from the main regional trade and transit arrangements: the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).[189] The unwillingness of the United States to join the CPTPP, RCEP, or to offer meaningful expansion of market access through bilateral agreements signaled a lack of serious commitment to many of Washington's partners in the region. Already skeptical at mid-decade about the durability of the U.S. focus on the Indo-Pacific region and fearing it as a distracted and unreliable partner, critical U.S. allies and partners in the region understandably awaited their economic future in a second Trump administration with a degree of apprehension.[190]

In sum, America's approach to economic interaction and influence across the Indo-Pacific during the early 2020s produced mixed results. The Biden administration's focus on securing critical supply chains enhanced specific economic exchanges with some important regional strategic partners and generated important initiatives and tangible influence. But the absence of a robust, respected, multilateral trade and tariffs framework kept many other

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American partners at arm's length—worried about U.S. economic staying power in the region and hedging with China so as not to be left out in the cold should American interest or engagement wane. Thus, China retained a distinctive advantage in leveraging economic influence to achieve strategic objectives.[191]

China. In the 2020s, Beijing remained confident in its ability to use economic statecraft to pursue its regional agenda, although mounting headwinds at home created a perception that China's influence may have peaked. China's GDP, adjusted for purchasing power parity, reached US$34 trillion in 2023, compared to $25 trillion for the United States (in nominal GDP terms, the United States maintained a roughly $10 trillion advantage). As with most countries, China's GDP growth rates slumped during the pandemic but then rebounded. In 2023, the World Bank estimated Chinese growth at 5.2 percent up from 2.2 percent in 2020, which compared favorably to the United States, whose growth in 2023 was 2.5 percent. There was also a surge in Chinese global investments after zero-COVID policies were lifted in late 2022, with some of the strongest investments supporting China's electric vehicle production.

In the context of Great Power competition, Chinese analysts expressed confidence that most Asian countries, even close U.S. allies, would not lean too strongly against Beijing due to China's market appeal. Indeed, in 2023, China remained the top import partner for all five U.S. treaty allies and was the top export partner for four of the five (it was Thailand's number two export partner, after the United States). Beijing saw some signs that its economic attractiveness could stabilize its strategic influence as third countries sought to maintain Chinese trade and investment linkages even as competition with the United States intensified.[192] For instance, in October 2023, Australia decided not to cancel a Chinese company's 99-year lease on the port of Darwin, which has been the host to U.S. Marines since 2012. Similarly, South Korea was hesitant to fully embrace U.S. restrictions on transfers of advanced semiconductor manufacturing equipment to China given that the latter is of central importance to Korean producers.

Chinese analysts also continued to describe the Belt and Road Initiative as a source of comparative national advantage, given that the United States and its major European and Asian allies had not strongly invested in Eurasia's prodigious hard and soft infrastructure needs. Moreover, Xi continued to closely associate himself with the initiative.[193] However, the Belt and Road Initiative faced headwinds in the 2020s, stemming from several factors:

- the inability of many distressed recipients to pay back loans, which required the renegotiation or forgiveness of nearly US$80 billion in loans from 2020 through 2022
- tighter lending policies that diminished investments in projects unlikely to generate future revenue
- cancellations or delays in Chinese overseas construction contracts
- a narrative about Beijing luring vulnerable economies into a "debt trap."

While the Belt and Road Initiative has remained a core Xi policy, Beijing has increasingly emphasized a separate effort—the Global Development Initiative—that Xi announced in 2021, ostensibly as a way to gain support within the Global South, but whose actual

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financial outlays, centered on a US$10 billion fund, are far less ambitious than the Belt and Road Initiative as it existed in the mid-2010s.[194]

Despite China's confidence in its ability to use economic statecraft to shape the choices of its neighbors, there were lingering questions about China's resilience even after the zero-COVID policies were canceled and growth rates rebounded. Underlying issues such as China's demographic imbalance, flagging real estate sector, mounting local debt burdens, and growing state intervention in the market led many in the region and beyond to reassess China's economic standing relative to the United States. A 2023 Pew survey found that 64 percent of Japanese respondents viewed the United States as the world's leading economic power, compared to 22 percent for China. The 42-point gap widened from 32 points three years earlier. A similar shift took place in Indonesia, where in 2023 there was a 19-point margin for those describing the United States as the leading economic power, compared to a 3-point advantage for China in 2020. The foundation for Beijing's use of economic tools to gain advantages in regional competition might therefore be on shakier ground than sometimes assumed.

Russia. By late 2023, China had become Russia's main economic lifeline. It was Russia's largest trading partner, with an annual estimated trade volume of US$240 billion, and Beijing was dictating many of the terms underpinning Russia's tenuous economic survival. Discounted Russian oil prices benefited China, with Beijing reaping major savings on up to US$18 billion in fossil fuel purchases from January 2022 to June 2024. Chinese economic prowess and the absence of Russian alternatives witnessed Chinese manufactured products swamp Russian markets by early 2023, securing a significant share of once largely indigenous Russia markets for automobiles, airplanes, and railroad equipment.[195] Accelerating Western financial sanctions during 2024 blocked almost all Russian transactions in dollars or euros and made the Chinese yuan its primary trading currency—amplifying the control exerted by Chinese banks on Moscow's fiscal options. At the same time, the asymmetry in Sino-Russian economic relations was glaring. Although China was Russia's number one trade partner in 2023, it was only China's sixth largest and Sino-U.S. total trade that year eclipsed Sino-Russian trade by more than 2-to-1 (US$575 billion to US$240 billion).[196] Arguably, Beijing at mid-decade needed the United States more than Russia to assure its economic stature.

Aware of this vulnerability, Russia amplified several efforts at mid-decade to cultivate alternative, albeit modest, economic futures across the Indo-Pacific. Moscow is believed to have agreed to treaty terms with North Korea in June 2024 that appropriated Korean labor for its manufacturing industries in future years.[197] Putin's visit to Vietnam that same month generated an agreement for bilateral cooperation in education, science and technology, oil and gas exploration, clean energy, and to develop a nuclear science and technology center in Vietnam.[198] Finally, Russia continued to portray India as a future key player in Putin's vision for a Russia-led Greater Eurasia Partnership. Announced in 2016, dormant but not dead from 2022 to 2023, and then resurrected in the 2023 Russian Foreign Policy concept, Putin's Greater Eurasian Partnership offered integration of India into an economic framework linking New Delhi's imports and greater Russian fossil fuel exports through Central Asia and from the port of Vladivostok through rail and pipelines across Russia to its consumer markets in the West.[199] Russia and India continued to discuss these potential economic

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arrangements at all senior level meetings including at annual India-Russian summits like the one of July 2024.[200]

Conclusions

U.S. and Chinese strategic interests are less aligned and more important to both countries in the Indo-Pacific region than in any other area of the world, making it a central venue for their Great Power competition dyad. During the early 2020s, Beijing became more critical of the U.S. military presence and the U.S. alliance system in the region, arguing that it reflects Cold War thinking and emboldens U.S. allies to challenge Chinese interests. The FOIP vision and increased U.S. regional security cooperation in activities like the Quad continued to stoke Chinese fears of U.S. encirclement or containment.

Beijing's rapidly expanding military capabilities and more assertive rhetoric and actions in its maritime territorial disputes and toward Taiwan continue to exacerbate regional concerns about how a strong China will behave toward states across the Indo-Pacific. Most wish to involve the United States in their security activities without completely jettisoning economic relations with Beijing. Washington's relative disadvantage in economic power limits its ability to persuade countries to fully align with it economically against China now and for some time. Thus, it must develop flexible policies that allow China's neighbors to avoid an explicit choice of aligning completely with Washington or Beijing in the regional Great Power competition, unless they are compelled by Chinese behavior to do so.

At mid-decade, the CCP under Xi Jinping was moving China in the direction of increased authoritarian control and a greater state role in the economy including policies that prioritize stability over economic growth. These are likely to have adverse side effects within China and undercut the appeal of China's model in the region. If Washington can prioritize its many concerns with China and interact more effectively with like-minded allies and partners to develop a practical agenda, America's advantages in alliance diplomacy, relative trustworthiness, and resonance of ideological vision should be highly valued and enhanced. A strong and consistent message framed with allies and partners can send a positive signal to the Chinese people about the value of good representational governance and provide other states around the region a positive alternative framework that contrasts with China's authoritarian model and often coercive approach to influence.

A U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy that combines some degree of engagement with China and attention to balancing economic and military power around Beijing as a hedge will best serve U.S. aims. The United States will need to find a pragmatic basis for bilateral economic relations with China that de-risks from supply chains vital to U.S./Western defense systems while sustaining prudent economic interactions that pose a low threat to U.S. security and provide tangible economic benefits. A tit-for-tat trade war or full economic decoupling is unlikely to achieve that end.

During his early 2025 transition before becoming the Trump 2.0 administration's National Security Advisor (NSA), Michael Waltz commended the Biden administration's strategic cooperation with Indo-Pacific allies through minilateral initiatives like AUKUS, the Quad, and trilateral agreements involving Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and the United States.[201] Then the NSA and new U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, invested their second day on the job in a meeting of the Quad at the foreign minister's

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level.[202] These early signals suggested that a second Trump administration would do well to build on the military and diplomatic progress by the Biden administration with an array of Indo-Pacific allies and partners. Reinforcing enhanced alliances, building deeper military partnerships, extending cooperative training, and growing coproduction of interoperable military equipment are techniques that states of the region would continue to embrace and will work against unilateral Chinese efforts to intimidate. If the United States emphasizes its alliances, expands security cooperation with other partners, and actively engages in regional multilateral partnerships during the remainder of the 2020s, it can deal with Chinese regional security initiatives and actions from a position of strength and enhanced deterrence. Conversely, if Washington appears destined to disengage or devalue partnered alignments and activities to deter China, America may become less relevant and less able to shape the evolving regional security environment.

At the same time, the accelerating growth of U.S. and Chinese military forces in proximity risks accidental encounter, misjudgment, or miscalculation that could erupt in unintentional but deadly direct armed clashes. This growing risk requires that Washington and Beijing prioritize establishment of military-to-military confidence-building measures, communications structures, and guardrails to assure that Beijing (and Moscow) understand that accommodation of continuing U.S. presence is a better choice than conflict.

TEXTBOX 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Rallying regional support for American aims across the Indo-Pacific will require that the second Trump administration's officials be realistic about the nature of the regional China challenge and spell out clearly what meeting it will require. They must articulate why confronting China will be central to preserving the relatively stable, open, and democratic Indo-Pacific region that has taken hold over the past seven decades. The size and scope of China's economic presence across the Indo-Pacific region and its growing military prowess there mean that the United States requires a strategy that is as broad and enduring as the threat it is meant to counter.[203] Alone, American power in the Indo-Pacific region remains robust enough to keep China cautious for a while—perhaps to the end of this decade. Networked with an increasingly committed, militarily interoperable and interconnected network of regional allies and partners, American power can be postured to deter Beijing from acts of reckless intimidation and military provocation well into the 2030s and even beyond.

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Table 1. Framework for Assessing the Aspects/Categories of Competition	
Competitive Aspect/Category	**Main Competitive Elements**
Political and Diplomatic	Levels of influence in multilateral institutions, key posts held that control multilateral institutions, number, and strength of political alliances.
Ideological	Values and political systems' appeal.
Informational	The manner and degree of transnational communications—open and transparent vs. closed and restrictive; extent of denigration of "the other" in mass communications; ability to manage internal messages and project external messages.
Military	Size, posture, professionalism, and technological edge of armed forces; cohesion and capacity of military alliances.
Economic	Size, technological breadth, diversity, and resources based on the national economy; the innovation ecosystem of a national economy, including its access to and management of financial capital.

TEXTBOX 1

"Unsurprisingly, Taiwan, which Beijing often describes as the 'core of China's core interests,' is mentioned first, underscoring that it will remain the most sensitive issue in the bilateral relationship . . . if Taiwan is isolated and unsure about U.S. support it will be more likely to negotiate."

—David Sacks, "Unpacking China's 'Four Red Lines' and Its Warning to Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2024

TEXTBOX 2

"Russia is increasingly positioning itself to play the role of strategic spoiler. Aligning itself ever more closely with North Korea and China, Russia is creating the opportunity to support both nations militarily in any potential attack on South Korea or Taiwan, respectively—even if the bar is likely still too high for Moscow at present, since its own security interests are not directly at stake."

—Derek Grossman, "Russia Is a Strategic Spoiler in the Indo-Pacific," RAND, July 12, 2024

TEXTBOX 3

"China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, however, are unlikely to mellow overnight. The United States' struggle against these countries may not last forever, but Washington must prepare for a contest that could last years…Calling on Americans to stand up to autocratic aggression doesn't mean rushing into war; it means creating a future in which peace is secured through sustained investments in military strength and diplomatic outreach. It means rallying a nation to recognize its immense power and accept the responsibility to wield it, not in frenzied reaction but before the storm—with purpose and prudence."

—Michael Beckley, "The Strange Triumph of a Broken America," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2025)

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