

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy: Evolution and Future Prospects

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ABSTRACT

In 2017, the U.S. government adopted the Indo-Pacific concept to guide its strategy toward Asia. This initiative emerged from a decade of increasing U.S. engagement with military allies and strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. The primary objective of the Indo-Pacific strategy is to strengthen political and military ties between the United States and countries within this expansive area while countering China's growing influence. This paper will examine the progress of the U.S. National Security Strategy toward Asia in the 21st century and evaluate its possibilities for President Donald Trump's second administration. We will revisit the theoretical framework of offensive realism theory and its prospects for the rising competition between the United States and China. We argue that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy will continue to advance in the coming years, primarily through close cooperation with India, a key U.S. strategic partner. However, contrary to the expectations of the offensive realism, Washington will not lead a military balancing coalition in Asia to contain Beijing. Instead, the U.S. government will likely demand more responsibilities from its Asian allies, particularly Japan, requiring a greater commitment to maintaining a favourable regional balance of power.

Contribution/Originality: This paper contributes to the study of international politics and the development of international relations theories by analyzing the progression of the United States' security agenda in the Indo-Pacific. It proposes an alternative outcome to those suggested by theorists in this field.

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is a vast region that "stretches from the U.S. Pacific Coast to the Indian Ocean and encompasses Northeast and Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024). The Indo-Pacific concept gained significant attention among policymakers and political scientists after the U.S. government adopted it in official speeches and the National Security Strategy (NSS). In November 2017, during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Vietnam, President Donald Trump used the expression "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" to articulate

the U.S. perspective on this expanded region, defending an international rules-based order to protect the free flow of navigation (Le Thu, 2020). The NSS, released in December 2017, officially embraced the Indo-Pacific framework, combining the Pacific and Indian Oceans, to outline its regional policy within the global strategy. In 2018, the U.S. government renamed the Asia-Pacific Command – established in the 20th century to oversee U.S. military operations in Asia during the Cold War – to the Indo-Pacific Command (Prasad, 2020).

Although the Trump administration was the first to use the Indo-Pacific concept in the NSS, the U.S. interest in enhancing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) gained support at the beginning of the 21st century (Haenle, 2022). The George W. Bush administration's first NSS, released in September 2002, emphasized the importance of preserving sea lanes of communication in the IOR through close cooperation with the Indian government (Bush, 2002). In this document, Washington expressed concerns about China's military modernization and its impacts on neighboring areas. The U.S. government saw New Delhi as a potential stabilizing force in Asia. In 2005, the United States and India established a global partnership, focusing on defense cooperation (Vijayalakshmi, 2017).

The Barack Obama administration's security strategies continued to consider India an important partner in Asia but also engaged with Southeast Asian nations. The "rebalance" to Asia strategy aimed to improve the U.S. participation in the continent by modernizing its military alliances and enhancing strategic partnerships. One of the priority areas of U.S. interest was the South China Sea, which was experiencing rising military tensions due to maritime disputes involving China and its neighbors. The U.S. military alliance with the Philippines strengthened in this period. In 2014, through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, Manila allowed U.S. troops to access four military bases in the country to conduct operations (Marston, 2017). In the IOR, the strategic partnership with India advanced. In 2016, the last year of the Obama administration, New Delhi was elevated to Major Defense Partner of the United States (Smith, 2019).

The Indo-Pacific strategy promoted during the first administration of President Donald Trump emphasized the growing competition with China, which is described as a "revisionist power" that challenged U.S. supremacy (Trump, 2017). President Donald Trump enhanced the defense partnership with India, bringing New Delhi closer to the U.S. most powerful military allies in the region: Japan and Australia. In late 2017, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a multilateral forum involving Washington, New Delhi, Tokyo, and Canberra, was reactivated after a 10-year hiatus, gaining a ministerial level. Foreign and Defense ministers of the quartet met regularly to improve cooperation in security matters (Ollapally & Verma, 2023). These countries have also participated in joint military activities. The traditional Malabar maritime exercises, conducted by the U.S. and Indian Navies since 1992, included Japan in 2015 and Australia in 2020 (Prasad, 2020).

President Joe Biden continued the predecessor's policy toward Asia by enhancing the U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific, primarily through multilateral security partnerships. In 2021, he elevated the Quad to a leader-level forum, aiming to institutionalize its functions. Since then, the member states leaders have met annually to discuss their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region (Wei, 2022). Additionally, the Biden administration established the AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership that brings

together Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to strengthen military cooperation, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region (Satoru, 2022). In 2024, President Biden created a new trilateral security partnership involving the United States and two military allies, Japan and the Philippines, to enhance defense cooperation.

The increasing interest of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region is a strategy to balance the rise of China. International relations scholars argue that Beijing's growing economic and military involvement in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War, along with its activities in South Asia over the past two decades, has led to the consolidation of an expanded security architecture in Asia (Buzan, 2012). In response, the United States has broadened its strategic focus from the Asia-Pacific in the Bush and Obama administrations to the Indo-Pacific framework in the Trump and Biden administrations. Washington's intention is primarily to limit the expansion of Chinese influence. The U.S. government aimed to prevent the potential rise of China as a regional hegemon (Mearsheimer, 2014).

This paper will examine the progress of the U.S. National Security Strategy released by U.S. presidents in the 21st century. We will focus on the evolution of Washington's foreign policy toward Asia, particularly the foundation of the Indo-Pacific strategic outlook. We will revisit the principles of offensive realism theory proposed by the American international relations scholar John J. Mearsheimer. We chose this theoretical framework because of its focus on the rising U.S.-China rivalry and its impacts on the regional balance of power. In conclusion, we will prospect the U.S. strategy in Asia during President Donald Trump's second administration.

1.1. Research Objectives

- i. To analyze the evolution of U.S. security strategy towards Asia during the 21st century;
- ii. To examine the prospects made by the offensive realism theory to the growing power competition between the United States and China;
- iii. To prospect the future of the U.S. security strategy towards the Indo-Pacific during Donald Trump's second administration.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Advancing the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Researchers in U.S.-Asian security studies have identified several reasons for the U.S. initiative to merge the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean into a unified strategy. A primary factor is the advancement of China's strategy across Asia over the past decade. Tellis (2017) argues that the One Belt and One Road plan, promoted by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 to develop infrastructure in other countries, has expanded Beijing's presence in Southeast and South Asia. Additionally, China has modernized its military capacity to operate long distances, extending its reach into the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to counter Chinese expansionism by improving the U.S. regional approach and integrating the Pacific and Indian Oceans into a single plan to maintain the U.S. primacy in this vast region.

Nordin and Weissman (2018) state that the "rebalance to Asia" strategy, implemented during the Obama administration, marked the beginning of the Indo-Pacific plan.

According to them, Obama's foreign policy aimed to strengthen U.S. military alliances and foster strategic partnerships throughout the Asia-Pacific while improving relations with India. The U.S. interest in engaging with New Delhi was driven by the Indian opposition to the project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that passes through the contested region of Kashmir. Furthermore, by incorporating India into its Asia-Pacific strategy, Washington extended its influence in Asia, including the Indian Ocean Region.

[Hu and Meng \(2020\)](#) argue that U.S. strategists' acknowledgement of the importance of the Indian Ocean to national interests was crucial to introducing the Indo-Pacific strategic outlook. They highlight that the growing interconnectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans has transformed the region into the most critical trade corridor, heightening U.S. interests in commercial activities. Additionally, Indian economic growth over the last two decades has established it as a significant geopolitical player. Supporting this argument, [Haenle \(2022\)](#) states that the U.S. government's approach to the Indo-Pacific region as a cohesive structure is driven by its importance for global stability. He identifies freedom of navigation and the interest in preventing the rise of regional hegemony as the primary interests behind the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

According to [Tan \(2020\)](#), the United States adopted the Indo-Pacific strategic outlook to gain support from Asian nations and build a military coalition to counterbalance China's growing influence. However, Southeast Asian countries are cautious about taking a firm stance against Beijing. As a result, they have chosen not to take a side in this great power competition and prefer to enhance bilateral cooperation with China and the United States. In contrast, [Rajagopalan \(2017\)](#) argues that, given the threat posed by China and its military superiority in Asia, it is more prudent for Asian countries concerned about Beijing's development, such as India, to militarily align with the United States.

2.2. Offensive Realism

At the beginning of the 21st century, the American international relations scholar [Mearsheimer \(2001\)](#) developed the offensive realism theory with the book *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, first published in 2001. Offensive realism explores the relationship between the international system and the competition among great powers. This approach is a subset of structural realism, a theory introduced by the American international relations scholar [Waltz \(1979\)](#) with the publication *Theory of International Politics* during the Cold War. [Waltz \(1979\)](#) work analysed the relationship between the structure of the international system and the state's behaviour. Neorealism states that anarchy, the interactions between the states, and the distribution of capabilities among them are the primary factors influencing international relations.

According to [Waltz \(1979\)](#), states seek power – particularly military – to ensure their survival in the international system, given the uncertainties inherent in the anarchical structure. States operate independently in a self-help world aiming to achieve their goals. Since they cannot trust one another, states remain cautious about the intentions of others. Consequently, the only way for states to guarantee their survival is by increasing their power. However, the search for power is limited. He argues that states tend to be prudent in pursuing additional power because they fear triggering a violent escalation. Great powers, like the United States and the Soviet Union, try to preserve the balance of power to maintain stability in the international system and guarantee their survival.

[Mearsheimer \(2001\)](#) criticizes Waltz for his understanding of great powers' prudence and argues that structural realism should be divided into two categories: defensive and offensive. He states that while both approaches examine how the structure of the international system influences power competition among states, they differ fundamentally in their views on the pursuit of power. Unlike [Waltz \(1979\)](#) perspective, [Mearsheimer \(2001\)](#) contends there are no limits to how much power states will seek. This viewpoint aligns with what he calls offensive realism, where states strive to increase their power at the expense of others, as this is the only way to maximize their chances of survival.

According to offensive realism, states aim to dominate the international and become global hegemon to ensure their survival. However, [Mearsheimer \(2001\)](#) states that due to the challenges of projecting military power over large bodies of water, states typically strive to dominate their neighboring areas, achieving the regional hegemon position. He notes that regional hegemons often act as offshore balancers in other parts of the globe to prevent the rise of competing hegemons. He claims that a regional hegemon will try to maintain its status as the international system's greatest power and the sole regional hegemon. Great powers constantly attempt to shift the balance of power in their favor. Consequently, the most reliable way for a state to ensure its survival is to establish itself as the only regional hegemon in the international system.

A regional hegemon concentrates so much economic and military power that no other state in the same region can threaten its supremacy. Offensive realism states that there are two types of power: latent or potential and actual or military power. Latent power refers to socioeconomic indicators such as population size, economic strength, and wealth. Another relevant factor is the country's participation in global manufacturing. These elements form the foundation of military power, encompassing tangible assets such as the size of national armed forces, military inventory, and the number of nuclear weapons.

[Mearsheimer \(2001\)](#) argues that the United States remained the world's sole regional hegemon after the Cold War, dominating the Western Hemisphere, which refers to the Americas. According to him, although other powerful states in the international system exist, such as Russia and China, none could dominate their regions as the United States does. Moscow has to balance its power with those of Western European nations, and Beijing balances with Japan, Russia and India in Asia. However, in the updated edition of his book that includes a chapter about the Chinese rise, [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) argues that with its formidable economic growth and rapid industrial development, China tends to search for regional hegemony in Asia, becoming a peer competitor to the United States in the international system.

Although Chinese leaders have emphasized their peaceful intentions, [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) points out that Beijing has adopted a revisionist posture by engaging in territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. He suggests that if China continues to grow economically, it will increase its military power and seek to dominate the region to protect its interests. He also mentions China's great dependence on maritime routes between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific for its energy supply. Consequently, Beijing would likely pursue greater control over this extensive area, pushing Washington away. By isolating the United States from Asia and widening the power gap with neighbouring countries like Japan, India, and Russia, China would rise as the Asia's hegemon.

Nonetheless, [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) claims that Washington will try to impede the rise of China, most likely through a containment plan that involves other Asian countries. This strategy was implemented during the Cold War to limit the expansion of the Soviet Union. It involved the establishment of multiple military alliances worldwide. He posits that the United States would likely form a balancing coalition with China's neighbours, similar to the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which would make it difficult for Beijing to project its power reliably into distant regions such as the Persian Gulf and, particularly, the Western Hemisphere. He also suggests that other Asian nations would likely join this coalition due to the threat posed by China.

Regional hegemons can employ various strategies when concerned about the rise of a competitor in other regions. These strategies may include launching a preventive war against the perceived threat, constraining the potential regional hegemon's economic growth, or increasing instability within the rival states, internally or externally. [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) also emphasized that regional hegemons might delegate the balancing role to other regional great powers. However, according to him, due to the military gap between Beijing and other Asian countries, the United States should continue to act as an offshore balancer and try to form a military coalition in Asian in order to prevent the rise of China.

In a recent publication, offensive realism's founder argues that China's rise as a great power and possible regional hegemon in Asia resulted from a miscalculation in U.S. strategy toward Beijing. [Mearsheimer \(2021\)](#) argues that successive U.S. administrations prioritized engagement with Beijing after the end of the Cold War even when they did not have a common rival, like the Soviet Union. This approach provided significant economic benefits to China, such as granting the permanent states of the most favoured nation and facilitating its entry into the World Trade Organization. These benefits contributed to Beijing's economic growth and emergence as a military power. He contends that the U.S. should adopt a strategy to limit China's development by restricting its access to the international trading system and curbing its access to advanced U.S. technologies.

3. Research Methods

This paper presents a case study on the evolution of the U.S. strategic approach toward Asia during the 21st century and considers prospects for the years ahead. We will conduct this qualitative research using primary and secondary bibliographic sources.

We will examine all of the National Security Strategies released by the U.S. Presidents in the 21st century: George W. Bush (2002; 2006), Barack Obama (2010; 2015), Donald Trump (2017), and Joe Biden (2022). We also will utilize reports from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and other institutions to gather economic and military data from the United States, China, India, and Japan. We will not include Russia in this analysis, as the U.S. government does not consider Moscow a central player in the Indo-Pacific theatre. Our bibliography also includes documents, statements and reports published by the U.S. government and organizations. Additionally, we refer to journal articles, research papers, book chapters, and analyses authored by political scientists and international relations scholars.

We will use offensive realism, a theoretical framework of international relations. The core principles of this theory will help us analyze the reasons behind the growing competition between the United States and China. We will also examine the current development of the U.S. security strategy towards Asia compared with the expectations of Offensive Realism's founder, John J. Mearsheimer.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. U.S. Security Strategy in the 21st Century

Over the past two decades, U.S. strategy towards Asia has evolved, placing the region at the center of Washington's foreign policy. East Asia was crucial to U.S. strategy during the Cold War due to military tensions with the Soviet Union and its allies. Although this dynamic changed after the conflict, the presence of U.S. troops and the continuation of military agreements with Asian countries indicated a sustained interest in the region. The United States has maintained bilateral military agreements with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Thailand. Important events, such as China's missile tests in the Taiwan Strait in 1996 and North Korea's ballistic tests and nuclear development, have justified the continued U.S. presence in Asia due to the threat that these two actors represent to regional and global stability.

During the George W. Bush administration, U.S. security strategy focused on international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. These issues became central to U.S. foreign policy during the first decade of the 21st century due to the attacks on American soil in September 2001. Because of the start of the War on Terror, the Middle East emerged as the primary region for U.S. military performance following the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The first NSS released by President Bush also considered the U.S. relationship with India, mainly due to the interest in safeguarding sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean. In East Asia, the focus was on China's military development and the perceived threats it posed to regional stability. The U.S. government argued that Beijing enhanced its military capabilities, endangering its neighboring region (Bush, 2002).

The second NSS of the Bush administration, published in March 2006, continued focusing on the war against terrorist groups in the Middle East. In Asia, it gave attention to relations with the Indian government, mainly due to the progress of the nuclear agreement negotiations, finalized in August 2008. In East Asia, Washington again expressed serious concerns about the Chinese military development. Bush (2006) noted that China had become a global player, but its "non-transparent" military modernization and increasing trading activities could destabilize the region. Nonetheless, like the first one, Bush's second NSS did not outline a plan to address Beijing's military progress, as the war on terror remained its priority.

After nearly a decade of military operations in the Middle East, President Barack Obama released his first NSS in May 2010, emphasizing the need to enhance U.S. engagement in the Asia-Pacific. This strategy, called "rebalance to Asia", aimed to improve U.S. involvement in the region by modernizing the U.S. military alliances with Asian countries and increasing U.S. participation in multilateral forums. Obama administration sought to work more closely with its military partners, especially Japan, but it also proposed to engage with China, Russia and India. In Southeast Asia, the priority was to collaborate

with U.S. counterparts through multilateral organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asia (ASEAN) and the East Asian Summit (EAS) (Obama, 2010).

The second NSS of the Obama administration, released in February 2015, gave more attention to maritime security issues in Asia-Pacific owing to the growing instability in the region caused by tensions in the East and South China Seas. In this strategy, Washington advocated using international law to settle disputes between China and its neighbors. This document also emphasized the importance of improving U.S. military alliances, especially with Japan and the Philippines and establishing new strategic partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. The advance of the partnership with India was seen as an important element, mainly because of the advent of the Act East Policy, proposed by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who intended to strengthen the political ties between the IOR and Southeast Asia. Although Obama (2015) emphasized preoccupations about Chinese military growth, his administration sought to foster a constructive relationship with Beijing through high-level talks with the Chinese government.

President Donald Trump's NSS dramatically changed the U.S. approach towards China, which was identified as one of the biggest "challengers" to U.S. power. This document characterized Beijing as a "revisionist power" that sought to alter the regional balance of power in its favor. Trump (2017) emphasized that the Chinese military deployments in the Indo-Pacific and its investments in Asian countries' infrastructure, like constructing ports, intended to restrict U.S. access to the region. Consequently, Washington recognized the necessity to strengthen military alliances and advance defense partnerships. India was a priority during Trump first administration, which offered some benefits to New Delhi, such as free access to dual-use technologies. Trump also gave importance to multilateral defense cooperation, especially through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) reactivated in December 2017.

The NSS of the Joe Biden administration maintained the approach of his predecessor by focusing on the Indo-Pacific as a priority theatre because of the competition with China. According to Biden (2022), Beijing aimed to reshape the international order, becoming the global leading power. This strategy also broadened the scope of the Indo-Pacific region, including the South Asian mainland, due to China's increasingly coercive behavior along the Himalayan border. Biden also underscored the U.S. involvement in security initiatives, such as the Quad and AUKUS. Furthermore, his NSS highlighted the significance of enhancing the defense capacity of U.S. partners, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, to address emerging security threats.

The shift in U.S. security strategy toward Asia has primarily been driven by increasing concerns about China's economic and military advances and their implications for U.S. interests. After the Cold War, the United States maintained its status as the greatest military power in the international system. Washington has ensured its global presence through military alliances and bases, particularly in Asia, where more than 80,000 troops are stationed (Kane, 2024). Nonetheless, the rise of another military superpower threatens the United States' supremacy. Consequently, the U.S. NSS has evolved to address Washington's potential peer competitor: China.

4.2. Military Development

Since the 1990s, China has experienced significant economic growth and industrial progress. In 2010, Beijing became the second-largest economy and, two years later, the global leader in manufacturing. China is also at the forefront of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which focuses on developing cyber-physical systems. In May 2015, the Chinese government launched the “Made in China 2025” industrial development plan, which involved substantial investments in key industries such as information technology, aerospace and aviation equipment, and maritime engineering (Li, 2018).

In addition to its economic and industrial factors, China is home to the second-largest world population, just behind India and four times larger than the United States. The huge Chinese population plays a crucial role in driving the country’s economic development due to its capacity for both production and consumption. The socioeconomic indicators, including economic strength, industrial status and population size, form the latent power that represents the country’s potential to enhance its military capabilities and rise as a great power (Mearsheimer, 2001; 2014).

Table 1: Latent Power of the Great Powers in the Indo-Pacific Region (2023)

	United States	China	Japan	India
Population (millions)	334.9	1,409.7	124.5	1,428.6
GDP (trillions of dollars)	27.7	17.7	4.2	3.5
Share of World Manufacturing Output (per cent)	16	29	7	3

Note: The data about the countries’ participation in world manufacturing is available at Baldwin (2024). *China is the world’s sole manufacturing superpower: A line sketch of the rise.* The data related to the “population” was collected from The World Bank (2024a), and the data related to the “GDP” was retrieved from The World Bank (2024b).

According to the principles of offensive realism theory, the components of the latent power, as shown in Table 1, serve as the foundation of military strength. States with substantial socioeconomic resources can develop robust army forces (Mearsheimer, 2014). Therefore, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) modernization is a product of the Chinese economic and industrial success over the past three decades. The 2024 annual report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) states that China’s military expenditure has consistently increased from 1994 to 2023. This report notes that in 2023, China had the second-largest military budget, accounting for 1.7 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Although Chinese military spending was significantly lower than that of the United States, it still represented 50 per cent of the total military expenditure in Asia and Oceania (Tian et al., 2024).

The data shown in the Table 2 highlighted the U.S. military superiority compared to the other great powers in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. government invests heavily in improving its military projection capabilities, utilizing modern assets such as fifth-generation aircraft, aircraft carriers, and ballistic missile submarines. China has focused on strengthening its defense capabilities through an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, particularly in the South China Sea (Bitzinger, 2016). A key difference between the two countries is the number of military bases they operate abroad. The United States maintains approximately 800 bases overseas, while China has limited military facilities

in Djibouti (Holton, 2022). Over the past two decades, Beijing has concentrated on establishing military facilities in the South China Sea, in the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

Table 2: Military Power of the Great Powers in the Indo-Pacific Region (2023)

	United States	China	Japan	India
Military Expenditure (billions of dollars)	916	296	50.2	83.6
Armed Forces (millions)	1.3	2	0.3	1.4
Nuclear weapons	5,044	500	-	172

Note: The data about the size of “armed forces” and the number of “nuclear weapons” is available at SIPRI (2024). *SIPRI Yearbook 2024, Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*;

The data related to the “military expenditure” was collected from Tian et al. (2024). *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023*

Although the United States and China have a significant military gap, Beijing has a significant advantage over the other Asian great powers. Japan and India have considerably lower economic resources and military investments than China. The growing power asymmetry between Beijing and these two actors represents a serious concern to the U.S. government, as reflected in the NSS since the George W. Bush administration. More recently, the strategies of Trump and Biden administrations have emphasized China’s intentions to shift the regional balance of power in its favor.

The balance of power in East Asia is upheld by the United States through its military bases in the region and its allies, primarily Japan, against China. In the IOR, India continues to be a dominant force. However, Chinese military deployments are starting to interfere in the regional dynamics. The growing military presence of PLA in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean is seen by the U.S. government as an attempt to reshape the international order. In response, Washington has developed a comprehensive strategy, encompassing the Asia-Pacific and the IOR, to prevent China from becoming a dominant regional power and potentially establishing itself as Asia’s hegemon.

Mearsheimer (2014) outlined some strategies the United States might adopt to contain the Chinese rise. As described in the literature review section, the most likely strategy would involve forming a military coalition in Asia similar to NATO. He argues that neighboring countries, fearing the advance of PLA, would have incentives to join a balancing alliance with Washington. However, neither Asian leaders nor the U.S. government has established or discussed a coordinated strategy towards Beijing. Economic dependence on China and concerns about escalating tensions with a powerful country have hindered other Asian nations, mainly Southeast Asia, from adopting a strategy to contain Beijing. While Washington continues to act as an offshore balancer, it has opted for a less aggressive and costly approach to curtail Chinese rise. This strategy includes urging Tokyo to assume greater responsibilities in maintaining regional balance and engaging with India, providing New Delhi with military equipment.

4.3. Japan

The United States and Japan have a long history of military cooperation. In September 1951, the two countries signed a security treaty establishing their military alliance. Since then, Japan has relied on the United States’ military protection. Japan hosts the largest U.S. military presence overseas, with approximately 55,000 troops stationed at 15

military bases (Berkofsky, 2022). In the 1990s, Washington began pressuring the Japanese government to take a more active role in international security matters. During the Gulf War, the United States urged Japan to send troops to the Middle East to support the international coalition. However, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) were constrained by the Constitution, which prevented them from operating abroad.

In the 21st century, important international events, such as the U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, prompted calls for a more effective response from Japan. Although the Japanese Constitution has not been amended, the government has enacted laws that permit the JSDF to participate in international missions. Notable examples include the Antiterrorist Law (2001) and the Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance in Iraq Law (2003). These legislations enable the JSDF to engage in various overseas activities, including reconstruction, disaster relief, and logistical support for allied troops.

In July 2014, the Japanese Diet passed the Peace and Security Law. This new legislation reinterpreted the Japanese Constitution's antimilitarist norm, recognizing Japan's right to collective self-defense. Since then, the JSDF has been able to join the armed forces of allied countries under attack and respond to overseas contingencies (Kurosaki, 2018). The U.S. government has also demanded Japan increase its military budget, which hovers around 1 per cent of its GDP. During his first administration, President Trump urged Japan to boost its defense spending in response to the rising threat posed by China and increase the payment for the U.S. troops allocated to the Japanese territory (Seligman, 2019).

In December 2022, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida unveiled the New Security Strategy, the first update in 11 years. This strategy included a commitment to increase Japan's annual military spending to 2 per cent of its GDP by 2027. It also proposes enhancing Japan's defense capabilities by acquiring counterstrike options. These measures aim to "*strengthen the Alliance's deterrence and response capabilities*" (Kishida, 2022, p.22). By emphasizing the growing military challenge posed by China in its NSS and defending the importance of close collaboration with Washington, the Japanese government demonstrated its interest in contributing more to regional stability.

4.4. India

The U.S.-India strategic partnership is another important pillar of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2018, during the second year of Trump administration, India was elevated to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1-status, which granted New Delhi license-free access to a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the U.S. Department of Commerce (U.S. Department of State, 2025a). This designation is typically reserved for U.S. allies, making India the third Asian country to receive it, after Japan and South Korea (Haenle, 2022).

Furthermore, during his first administration, President Trump signed two defense agreements with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The first agreement was the Communications, Compatibility, and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which intended to improve interoperability between their armed forces during joint military exercises and provide New Delhi with advanced military systems, like drones for surveillance (Pandit, 2018). The military exercises have been a central instrument in their strategic partnership. Additionally to the Malabar maritime exercises, since 2019, both countries have conducted the tri-service Tiger-Trumph military exercises. In 2020, India and the

United States signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), which provided New Delhi with U.S. geospatial intelligence to monitor military activities in the IOR and along its land borders.

Cooperation in the defense industry is another point of the U.S.-India strategic partnership. In June 2023, they launched the India-United States Defense Accelerator Ecosystem (INDUS-X) to develop new defense systems through private and public investments. Arms trade also plays a critical role in their relationship. In 2019, India became the world's largest arms importer, primarily obtaining its military equipment from Russia (Wezeman et al., 2024). The U.S. government has been actively encouraging India to increase its purchases of U.S. weaponry, which already constitutes the second largest source of New Delhi's military acquisitions. After taking office for his second administration, President Trump urged Modi to buy more U.S. military equipment (Schipani & Kaushik, 2025). This issue will be a hot topic in the U.S.-India agenda in the coming years.

4.5. Trump II

During the second Trump administration, the NSS is expected to emphasize strengthening defense cooperation with Japan and India. The aim is for both countries to take a more prominent role in countering Chinese military advancements – Japan in East Asia and India in the Indian Ocean Region. As his first administration, President Trump will likely continue to pressure Japan to commit better to their military alliance. With India, it is projected that Trump will pursue great defense cooperation, targeting mainly weapons transfer. Cooperation with these two countries will also occur via the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. This initiative will continue to serve as a multilateral platform for discussing regional security issues and promoting close collaboration among the member countries through joint exercises. However, it is improbable that it will evolve into a military organization.

In January 2025, soon after President Trump took office, Secretary State Marc Rubio hosted the foreign ministers of Japan, India, and Australia for a multilateral meeting. Although the joint statement did not explicitly mention China, it highlighted the quartet's commitment to "oppose any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion" (U.S. Department of State, 2025b). Additionally, the Prime Ministers of Japan and India were among the first international leaders to visit the White House during the early days of Trump's second administration. The leaders agreed to foster initiatives to enhance defense cooperation. These events emphasize Trump's attention to the Indo-Pacific region, which tends to continue as a priority theatre for U.S. military performance.

Another point of Trump II's strategy towards China will likely involve the rise of trade tariffs, which Washington already announced, but mainly the export sanctions. During his first administration, President Trump took various measures to restrict the transfer of U.S. technology to Beijing, focusing on the Chinese high-tech sector, electronics and military and defense entities. Between 2017 and 2021, Trump added 384 Chinese entities to the export control list, three times the total from the previous four administrations (Chorzempa et al., 2024). In 2020, Washington created the Military End User List to restrict exporting military goods to adversary countries, including China. Biden administration kept the same number of Chinese entities on the U.S. export control list. The U.S. government hopes to impede Chinese military development by limiting its

access to advanced technologies. In his second administration, it is expected that Trump will continue to target the Chinese technology entities, especially those to military ends.

5. Conclusion

The United States strategy for the Indo-Pacific, developed throughout the 21st century, has a central objective: to ensure U.S. supremacy in this vast region. Although Washington possesses military superiority, with bases spread around this region, the increasing Chinese military expansion and its growing presence in South and Central Asia threatens U.S. interests. The possible rise of China as a regional hegemon has been emphasized since Donald's Trump first administration, who have pointed out Beijing's interest to alter the balance of power in Asia and, consequently, the international order. Therefore, a key goal of the U.S. foreign policy in Asia is to prevent China's rise.

The increasing rivalry between Washington and Beijing aligns with the expectations outlined by [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) and his theoretical framework, offensive realism, which predicted a potentially "unpeaceful" rise of China as a regional hegemon in Asia. However, the development of international relations in the Indo-Pacific suggests some modification of his prospectations. Rather than leading a military coalition with regional allies and partners, Washington has opted to curb China's growth by strengthening bilateral relations with the two other Asian great powers, Japan and India. The U.S. aims to transfer more responsibilities to these two nations in regional security matters. In the two last NSSs, the U.S. government emphasized the necessity of Tokyo and New Delhi to assume a regional security provider role. By encouraging Japan to develop its military capabilities and transfer defense equipment to India, Washington expects these actors to develop a better participation in balancing China. However, due to the high economic and security costs involved, the creation of a military alliance with New Delhi and the formation of a military coalition led by the United States in Asia are unlikely in the near future.

Since the end of the Cold War, Washington has sought to maintain a balance of power in different regions favorable to its interests. In an increasingly turbulent international landscape marked by conflicts involving U.S. partners in Europe and the Middle East, the U.S. government tends to demand more from its allies to address the rising challenges. Due to the power asymmetry between China and the other Asian great powers, the U.S. military presence remains crucial in the Indo-Pacific region. However, according to President Trump and Biden's strategies, the United States expect a more determinant role from its regional partners in countering China's military advancements.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This research did not need to be submitted to the ethics committee of Hiroshima University to be conducted.

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Conflict of Interest

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