

# ERODING THE SPIRIT OF A NUCLEAR FREE PACIFIC

A Pacific  
Network on  
Globalisation  
Discussion  
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## PAPER #1: Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific

### Introduction: purpose of this paper

The announcement that Australia would be entering a new security pact with the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) to obtain nuclear powered submarines came as a shock to much of the world<sup>1</sup>. The pact promised to deliver a fleet of nuclear-powered, but conventionally armed submarines to Australia in the coming decades, and also set out an ambitious agenda of technological collaboration and military integration between the three countries. AUKUS, as this pact is called, and the broader patterns of militarisation of which it forms a crucial aspect are both direct responses to the intensifying geopolitical competition playing out between China and the US and its allies.

This discussion paper provides a brief overview of the US-China tensions and critically examines the predominant security framing through which the US and its allies (especially Australia) are pursuing their geostrategic objectives vis-à-vis China – the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, the paper demonstrates that a preoccupation with China as *the primary security threat* in the Indo-Pacific region is generating a deeply militarised security agenda, one that is deliberately exclusionary, necessarily hegemonic, and largely beholden to a perilous zero-sum logic.



## Acronyms

A2/AD - Area Access/Area Denial

AUKUS – the trilateral security pact signed by Australia, the UK and the US

ADF – Australian Defence Force

DPWP – Defence Policy White Paper (Australia, 2016)

FPWP – Foreign Policy White Paper (Australia, 2017)

DSR – Defence Strategic Review (Australia, 2023)

DSU – Defence Strategic Update (Australia, 2020)

FOIP – Free and Open Indo-Pacific

HMAS – Her Majesty's Australian Ship

IPEF – Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity

PBP – Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative

RAAF – Royal Australian Air Force

RAN – Royal Australian Navy

SCS – South China Sea

SEA – Southeast Asia

SPNFZ – South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (Rarotonga Treaty)

SSN – Nuclear-powered attack submarine

The Quad – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States of America

USINDOPACOM – US Indo-Pacific Command

# Great Power Competition and the Indo-Pacific Security Agenda

## Intensifying great power competition

The Pacific is living through a rapidly developing period of geopolitical uncertainty characterised by intensifying “great power competition” between the US (supported by its allies) and China<sup>2</sup>. This competition centres on the struggle for military, political, and economic influence over maritime Southeast Asia, the South China Sea (SCS), and the adjacent Indian and Pacific Oceans – what the US and US-aligned states are calling the Indo-Pacific (Figure 6). As a region of global economic and strategic (military) importance<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1<sup>4</sup>), both the US and China see their future economic and national security as being tied up in how the Indo-Pacific’s “connectivity” is ordered; that is, in whose interests the flows of people, goods, and information through the regions maritime and air trade routes can be governed, both in terms of ‘hard’ infrastructures (e.g., military bases) and ‘soft’ regulatory measures or socio-cultural ties (e.g., alliances, economic partnerships, free trade agreements etc.)<sup>5</sup>.

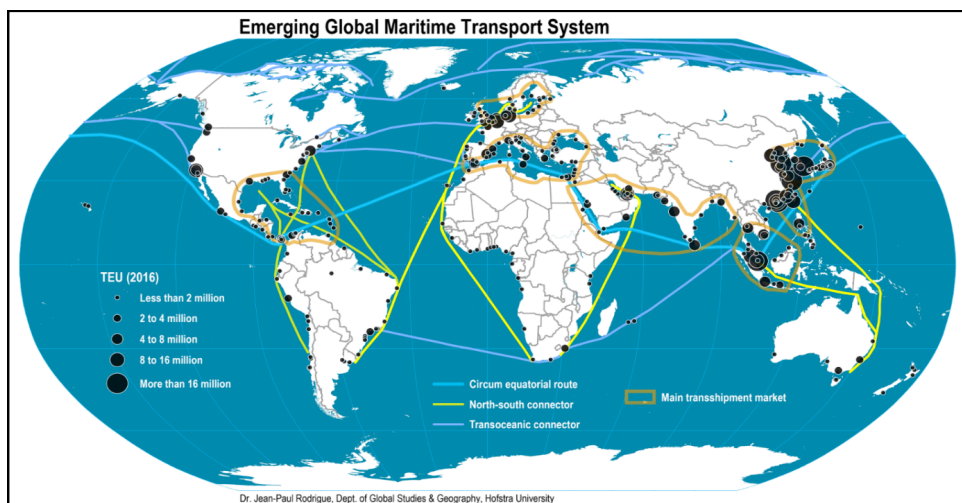


Figure 1 - Global maritime transport network as of 2016; TEU = twenty-foot equivalent unit, it is a measure of volume in units of twenty-foot long containers (i.e., 1 TEU = 1 20ft container). Adapted from Notteboom et al. 2022

At present, the US is by far the dominant power in the region<sup>6</sup>. Besides their economic weight, the US maintains a dense network of military bases, military access agreements, and defensive alliances in the region, all of which sustain an enormous military presence (Figure 2)<sup>7</sup>. However, over the last decade this dominant position has been perceived to be increasingly threatened by China.

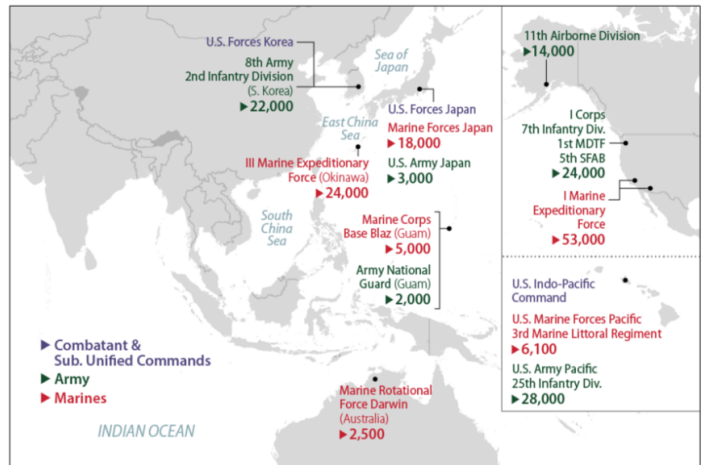
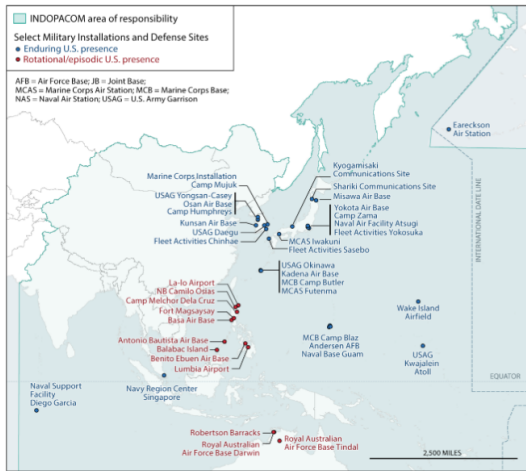


Figure 2 - US military presence in the Indo-Pacific. Left: Military infrastructure (Nicastro 2023). Right: Military personnel (Feickert 2022)

Since the early 2010's, China's political discourse and activities (both domestically and on the international stage) point to a growing capacity to become the leading power in what it calls its "near seas periphery" (i.e., the South and East China Seas) and to secure greater military, political, and economic influence in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans<sup>8</sup>. These apparent ambitions are the direct response to a set of particular geopolitical anxieties that centre on China's ability to deny potentially hostile military activities in its immediate vicinity and secure critical maritime supply chains (like food and energy) from possible disruption – conditions it believes are necessary for the country to continue to grow and develop<sup>9</sup>. Of particular concern to China is the ring of "defensive" US military installations and US-aligned states that surround it<sup>10</sup> (Figure 3 and Figure 4)<sup>11</sup>.



Figure 3 – US encirclement of China, note as of 2021 Afghanistan is no longer an ally and no long contains US military bases. Source: Prince Michael of Liechtenstein 2018.

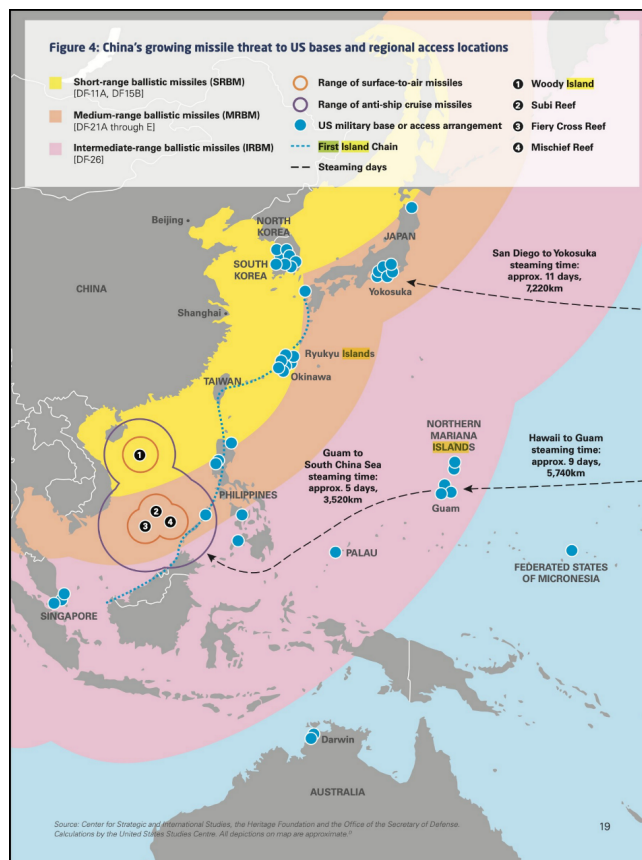


Figure 4 - US military containment of China in South China Sea and island Southeast Asia. Source: Townsend et al. 2019.

Due to its unique geopolitical anxieties, the shift in China's regional ambitions have been largely geared towards keeping pace with and ultimately being able to counter US interventions against China in the region, both militarily and economically. As such, it has been marked by economic, political, and military developments. Economically and politically, China's growing regional presence has included stronger diplomatic engagements; expanding regional aid, trade, and investment that promote alternative models for economic integration (e.g., Maritime Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative); the development and promotion of its own brand of economic growth (i.e., not implementing liberal reforms Western commentators argue should accompany growth); and structural changes to its domestic economy that seek to put it in direct competition with US (i.e., moving away from labour-intensive manufacturing to high-technology products and services as well as trying to build self-reliance in supply chains).

Militarily, China's rise has been marked by making major investments in all aspects of its military capabilities<sup>12</sup>. Particular focus has been given to the development of its 'Area Access/Area Denial' (A2/AD) capabilities in the region immediately surrounding China<sup>13</sup> and its maritime forces (Figure 4). It has also sought to increase the projection of military power beyond its "near seas periphery" into the Indian Ocean with the construction of a military base in Djibouti (2016) and possible dual purpose commercial deep-sea ports in various locations around the Indian Ocean<sup>14</sup> (Figure 5)<sup>15</sup>.



Figure 5 - China's Belt and Road Initiatives Source: Wong 2020

Furthermore, China has been increasingly undertaking various “provocative actions” in the SCS, including the large-scale construction/development and militarisation of artificial and other islands, and contesting the freedom of navigation for other states<sup>16</sup>. Finally, China has been increasingly assertive towards the reintegration of Taiwan, hinting toward the possibility of military intervention.

The combination of these actions puts China at odds with the US, “which for decades was prepared to facilitate China’s economic rise in return for investment and trade benefits accruing to US corporations and consumers, accompanied by the tacit assumption that with prosperity China would democratise and become more ‘like us’ [the US]”<sup>17</sup>. In particular, China’s actions have been increasingly taken to represent a direct challenge to the US’s economic and military power (which has underpinned its global dominance since WWII) and thus a threat to the “established global order and the central role of the United States”<sup>18</sup>.

Consequently, China’s ambitions have been increasingly represented as inimical to the US and US-aligned states’ future economic and national security by threatening to erode US regional hegemony and the liberal democratic economic order they preside over. Indeed, anything less than regional US domination is understood by the US and its allies as leaving them vulnerable to economic coercion and the creation of economic flows/orders outside of their control, as well as with a reduced capacity to project military power globally with relative impunity (seen as fundamental to their national security)<sup>19</sup>. In short, the US and allies, “worry that Beijing will gradually persuade its neighbours to distance themselves from the United States, accept Chinese primacy, and defer to Beijing’s wishes on key foreign-policy issues”<sup>20</sup>. Of particular concern is the potential loss of Taiwan who manufactures nearly 70 percent of the world’s semiconductors and around 90 percent of the most advanced chips and also represents the lynchpin of the US’s military superiority in the SCS<sup>21</sup>.

In the face of these perceived and actual threats, the US and its allies have increasingly sought to compete with China militarily, economically, and politically. They have adopted a range of “aggressive and conspicuous measures”<sup>22</sup> aimed at preserving the US balance of power and addressing what they see to be as the single greatest “threat” to US economic and national security<sup>23</sup> - China becoming a regional hegemon. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken put it: “the most serious long-term challenge

to the international order” is “the one posed by the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>24</sup> Such measures have included tariffs, export controls, visa restrictions, and sanctions against Chinese officials and companies, alongside a “charm offensive” of diplomatic engagements regionally<sup>25</sup>. At the same time, the US has, like China, placed significant emphasis on enhancing its military capabilities and maintaining (if not extending) its relative military power in the region, explicitly singling China out as the US military’s “pacing target”<sup>26</sup>.

These back-and-forth competitive actions are continuing to intensify bringing with them significant risks. Most notably, they are contributing to the creation of an environment where the supposedly defensive actions of each power are read and responded to as threats needing to be outmatched<sup>27</sup> (see definition of deterrence below). If restraint is not exercised, the potential for things to spiral dangerously out of control is very real. Indeed, China’s ambitions may sharpen if they fear that “the balance of power could turn against them decisively if the opportunity [to try and become a regional hegemon] was not seized” and if the US and its allies do not make it “crystal clear that they not trying to threaten China’s independence or territorial integrity, undermine the authority of the Chinese Communist Party, or crash the Chinese economy”<sup>28</sup>.

Despite this, both China and the US (with support from its allies) appear committed to centring military deterrence in their geopolitical manoeuvring. Looking at the US and its allies’ (especially Australia) security agenda – securing a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” in the Indo Pacific security theatre – this is especially apparent<sup>29</sup>.

### Securing the Indo-Pacific

First emerging in Japanese security discourse in the 2010s, the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a region and security theatre has come to be the primary geopolitical framing through which US and US-aligned states conceive of, coordinate, and deliver a range of activities aimed at competing with and ultimately countering China’s growing presence in the region to maintain the US balance of power<sup>30</sup> (Figure 6)<sup>31</sup>.

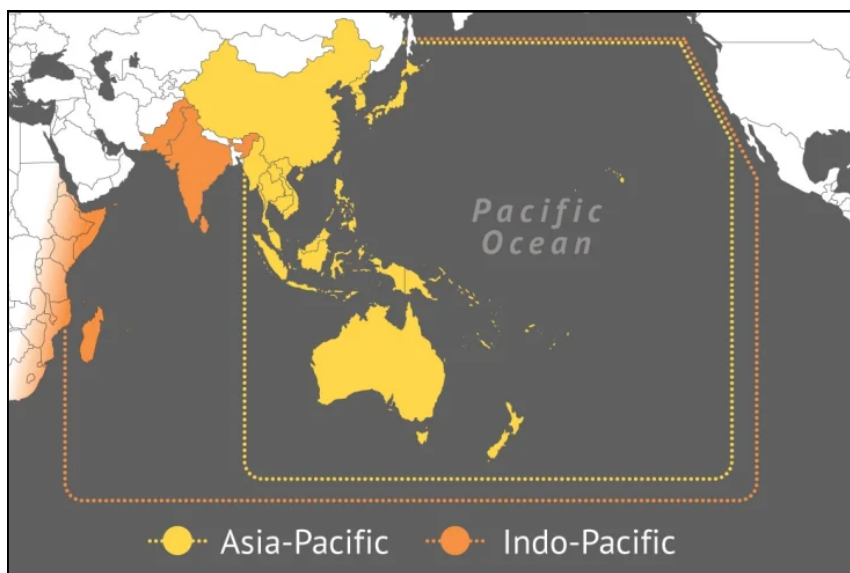


Figure 6 - A comparison of the Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific geopolitical framings. Source: Galloway 2021.

Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas and centred on the South China Sea and maritime Southeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific reimagines earlier framings of Asia such as the “Asia-Pacific” to construct an “integrated security theatre” for a maritime “super-region”

supposedly threatened by an increasingly assertive China. In doing so, it seeks to draw distant maritime democracies (India, Australia, Japan, the US and others) into a single geopolitical frame with the explicit purpose of enabling and legitimising anti-Chinese strategic cooperation that “works towards solidifying a regional and global order built around U.S. supremacy”<sup>32</sup>.

The core objective of strategic denial is articulated by major Indo-Pacific proponents (the US, Australia, and Japan) through their collective goal to maintain a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). For these states, “free” is defined as freedom from (Chinese) coercion consistent with international law and the “free” flow of goods and services (under US and allied terms of trade), and “open” refers to open sea way, air ways, and information channels (in particular freedom of navigation for the US military) guaranteed by international law (and policed by US). The goal of maintaining an FOIP and its underlying objective of strategic denial is especially clear in the context of the Pacific Islands region.

In considering the Pacific in the “Indo-Pacific” two geopolitical realities are clear. One is that for the dominant traditional Pacific powers, the US and Australia, maritime Southeast Asia and the SCS take geostrategic precedence in their foreign policy thinking and actions. And two, because of this hierarchy, the geostrategic value of the Pacific is understood primarily in terms of the role it plays in supporting US and Australian interests in maritime Southeast Asia and the SCS. This role can be summed up as remaining both free from any permanent Chinese military presence and densely integrated with the US and Australian military architecture – i.e., serving as a space for the operation of US and Australian strategic denial (Figure 7)<sup>33</sup>.



Figure 7 - How the Pacific serves US strategic interests in “securing” the Indo-Pacific through defensive island chains. (Source: Lohman 2020)

Such a role serves to address two interrelated geopolitical anxieties for the US and Australia. One, that a permanent Chinese military presence in the region would seriously complicate US access to its military installments and allies in Australia, Southeast Asia and the South and East China Seas. And two, for Australia, a significant or permanent Chinese military presence in the region would be viewed as dramatically hindering its “ability to defend [its] northern approaches, secure [its] borders and protect [its] exclusive economic zone.”<sup>34</sup>

Looking a little more closely at the “strategies” the US and Australia are pursuing to maintain a FOIP reveals several important, interrelated characteristics of these states’ understanding of and approach to geopolitical competition with China in the Indo-Pacific.



## 1) A deeply militarised approach

Both in terms of rhetoric and action, it is clear that traditional military concerns are a core aspect of the Indo-Pacific security framing and the pursuit of a FOIP and that military solutions to such concerns are prioritised over other possible courses of action<sup>35</sup>. As Dame Meg Taylor puts it, “The Indo-Pacific was crafted within defence circles and is oriented toward defence initiatives”<sup>36</sup>.

Looking at the US, the Biden administration’s “Indo-Pacific Strategy” (2022), which operates in conjunction with “National Defence Review” (2022) to set out the US’s strategic approach to the region, is primarily concerned with the US’s ability to “shape the strategic environment around Beijing”<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, in everything but the word, it sets out an ambitious agenda of “containment” through what the administration calls “integrated deterrence”<sup>38</sup>. This is defined as both increasing the presence and capabilities of the US military in the region, as well as intensifying regional partnerships with a particular focus on security/military partnerships that support a build-up of US military force in the region. As set out in the Strategy:

*Integrated deterrence will be the cornerstone of our approach. We will more tightly integrate our efforts across warfighting domains and the spectrum of conflict to ensure that the United States, alongside our allies and partners, can dissuade or defeat aggression in any form or domain.... Consistent with our broader strategic approach, we will prioritize our single greatest asymmetric strength: our network of security alliances and partnerships... We will foster security ties between our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, including by finding new opportunities to link our defence industrial bases, integrating our defence supply chains, and co-producing key technologies that will shore up our collective military advantages.*<sup>39</sup>

In other words, the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the defence spending authorised in pursuit of its objectives “provides a detailed blueprint for surrounding China with a potentially suffocating network of US bases, military forces, and increasingly militarized partner states... to enable Washington to barricade that country’s military inside its own territory and potentially cripple its economy in any future crisis.”<sup>40</sup>

This strategy of integrated deterrence is operationalised through initiatives like AUKUS, the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, and US-Australian military collaboration all of which are discussed in more detail in the following discussion paper.

Finally, the significance of the Indo-Pacific to US military thinking is also evidence by the changing of the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) to Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM).

Australia’s approaches to security in the Indo-Pacific can also be understood as militarised<sup>41</sup>. Although it has no formal “Indo-Pacific Strategy” it nonetheless organises its foreign relations policies and activities around the concept and is explicit about maintaining a FOIP. This is demonstrated through successive defence and foreign policy white papers, including the 2016 Defence White Paper (DWP), the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (FPWP), the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and the 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR), all of which reveal an abiding concern with pursuing traditional security objectives in the region, especially the Pacific. Indeed, the DWP can be read as establishing a “quasi-Monroe Doctrine in the Pacific”<sup>42</sup> (i.e., a doctrine of strategic denial) in which Australia commits “to limit the influence of any actor from outside the region with interests inimical to our own”<sup>43</sup> – a logic that has been maintained through the subsequent DSU and DSR. Furthermore, in the FPWP, which sets out Australia’s “Step-Up” agenda in the Pacific, ‘security’ is a preeminent and

recurring motif and there is a clear reorientation toward security as the “primary lens through which Canberra’s policy makers view relationships between Australia and Pacific Islands.”

In material terms, this abiding militarism is also revealed by the foreign policy activities Australia has pursued regionally including increases in rotational deployments of ships and aircraft, the sale of defence equipment, and the upgrading and development of regional bases (all of which are discussed in more detail in discussion paper 2).

More recently, and perhaps most significantly, the DSR introduces the concept of a “National Defence” strategy to replace the “Defence of Australia” strategy that had been at the heart of Australia’s strategic policy in the previous decades. In direct response to perceived threat posed by an assertive China and the growing risk of conflict between the US and China, Australia has shifted its priorities away from defending the continent and its immediate surroundings, to acquiring the capabilities of projecting power beyond its borders in order to address security challenges far beyond its borders.

This National Defence approach is underpinned by four pillars which echo the US concept of “integrated deterrence”.

1. A “whole of government” and “whole of nation” approach that leverages “all elements of national power” in the pursuit of achieving “National Defence”. This means a closer integration of military objectives with diplomatic efforts.
2. A deepening of ties with “traditional allies”, particularly through the implementation of AUKUS but also through bilateral security cooperation with Japan and trilateral cooperation with Japan and the US.
3. A reconfiguration of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) from a “balanced force” to a “focused force”, in which the ADF gives greater weight to their capacity to respond to (and support) great power conflict. This goes hand in hand with the final pillar.
4. Operationalising “deterrence by denial” by investing in the development of more potent and lethal long-range strike capability. Significantly, “deterrence by denial” establishes a significant role for closer US-Australia military relations such as upgrading Australian northern bases to accommodate US force rotations. This is discussed further in paper 2.

The complementary (and often overlapping) military agendas that underpin the US and Australia’s approach to security in the Indo-Pacific is explored in greater depth in paper 2.

## 2) Beholden to a zero-sum logic

In addition to prioritising military concerns and approaches to regional security, the Indo-Pacific security framing and the pursuit of a FOIP have largely adhered to a zero-sum logic in which adherents have “struggled to define success, or even a steady state, short of total victory or total defeat” of the US as a regional hegemon<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, the US and its allies seem to be unable to imagine, let alone work towards realising, what might be an appropriate role for China in the region. As a result, a wide range of activities being announced and pursued by proponents of the Indo-Pacific are highly reactionary and incoherent, being guided by an anti-China objective, rather than a regionally specific development agenda. This manifests most clearly in the attempts by Australia and the US to “outbid China in the Pacific”<sup>45</sup>. Prominent examples include:

- Australia’s efforts to counter the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei’s bid to construct a fibre optic cable for Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea
- The Australian government’s establishment of an AUD 2 billion fund to compete with China’s infrastructure development efforts.

- Australia outbidding China to redevelop the Fiji Black Rock military base and the combined US-Australia redevelopment of Lombrum naval base in PNG.
- The US and Australian reaction to the China-Solomon Islands security pact.
- The Australian reaction to the unfounded claims China was looking to develop a naval base in Vanuatu.

At its base, this commitment to zero-sum logic rests on the maintenance of US regional military hegemony.

### 3) Necessarily hegemonic with an emphasis on the status-quo

Another fundamental aspect of US and Australian approaches to the Indo-Pacific is their concern with maintaining current unequal power relations economically, politically, and militarily. The US, and by extension its allies, ultimately want to “perpetuate its pre-eminence and an international system that privileges its interests and values”[46](#).

As the US Indo Pacific Strategy puts it, “the US is an Indo-Pacific power” and as such, it is “determined to strengthen [its] long-term position in and commitment to the Indo-Pacific” to ensure the “American role in the region” will be “more effective and enduring than ever”[47](#).

Australia, for its part, supports this position completely and has shackled itself tightly to the US Indo-Pacific agenda of regional dominance. In doing so, it has implicitly signalled that it is incapable of imagining, let alone working towards a region in which the US is not the dominant economic and military power.

Finally, the US and Australia’s overarching concern with strategic denial in the Pacific leaves no space for actors that are not considered “like-minded powers” and actively seeks to counter China’s engagements with the region (thereby constraining Pacific states in their ability to exercise free choice in who they engage and how).

### 4) Deliberately exclusionary

Closely related to its hegemonic nature, the US and Australian approaches to security in the Indo-Pacific (as well as the very concept of the Indo-Pacific) can be read as rallying “like-minded” countries against China in a deliberately exclusionary manner. This is evidenced by the aggressive bilateral and multilateral engagements being pursued by the US and Australia in an effort to both more deeply integrate their approaches to regional security, but also create new security and economic frameworks that exclude or marginalise China while drawing in other regional players.

These developments are epitomised by the such initiatives as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (‘Quad’), the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP).

- The Quad was first established in 2007 as a forum for India, Australia, Japan and the US to collaborate on shared security challenges. Since its revival in 2017 the Quad has become increasingly concerned with strengthening partner states capacity to respond to an increasingly assertive China with a focus military cooperation (e.g., multilateral military exercises) and intelligence sharing.
- The IPEF is an economic initiative involving 13 Indo-Pacific regional nations[48](#) and the US. From its inception, the initiative has been transparently anti-China, aimed at “writing the new rules for the 21st century economy” to more deeply integrate the US economy and “decouple” states from China.

- The PBP was an initiative launched by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States to pursue “more effective and efficient cooperation in support of Pacific Island priorities”. However, as put by Fry et al. 2022, the PBP “runs roughshod over existing mechanisms devised by Pacific Island leaders to shape their interactions with larger powers and attempts to impose a new hierarchy of preferred ‘partners’ from outside”[49](#). It does so by creating a “special group of five ‘like-minded’ partners” who share “an interest in displacing or competing with China” – an “inner circle” that complicates existing regional structures.

## Conclusion: Key takeaways

The Pacific is entering an era of heightened geopolitical competition, characterized by the increasingly militarized posturing of both China and the US, along with its allies. This competition has been triggered by China's emergence as a “major regional actor” and how established powers, particularly the US and Australia, have responded to China's growing influence as a threat to their long-standing military, economic, and political dominance[50](#).

For the US and its allies, their approach to this competition has come to be framed by the geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific, which aims to establish a maritime security domain for enabling and legitimizing anti-Chinese strategic cooperation. However, as this paper demonstrates, an obsession with China as the primary threat in the Indo-Pacific has led to a heavily militarized approach to regional security. This approach is inherently hegemonic in its application, intentionally exclusionary in its intentions, and guided by a perilous zero-sum logic. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific security framework proposed by the US and its allies, especially Australia, instrumentalizes the Pacific by primarily defining it in terms of its role in supporting US and Australian interests in maritime Southeast Asia and the SCS. This role can be summarized as staying free from any permanent Chinese military presence and becoming deeply integrated with the US and Australian military architecture, essentially serving as a space for the operation of US and Australian strategic denial. Discussion paper two delves deeper into this situation and provides a more comprehensive account of US and Australian military activities and ambitions, including a detailed analysis of AUKUS.

The consequences of these developments are significant for the Pacific. Not only is Indo-Pacific framing driven by security concerns that are not shared by Pacific leaders and peoples, but its focus on deterrence and military might actually increases the potential for conflict. Furthermore, by nature of its framing, it inevitably involves Pacific nations in a militarized strategy that they have not played a part in creating. Lastly, the guiding anti-China logic results in disjointed policies aimed at countering China, which are unlikely to address the priorities of Pacific nations. For these reasons, among others, the Indo-Pacific security framework is actively contested by many Pacific leaders and peoples.

The consequences of the Indo-Pacific approaches to regional security and the indigenous Pacific's resistance to it are explored in detail in discussion paper three.

## Key Concepts and Definitions

### Geopolitics

Geopolitics is a broad term referring to the practice of international politics and international relations within an explicit geographical context. In particular, geopolitics is concerned with “how geographic features, locations, resources, and spatial arrangements influence and shape the behaviour of states and other international actors in the pursuit of their interests, security, and power.”<sup>51</sup> Geopolitics is central to questions over the access and control of resources and territory, geographically explicit alliances, the establishment and maintenance of bases, and security over trade routes (and many others).

### Geostrategic competition

Closely related to geopolitics, geostrategic competition can be understood as the “strategic interactions and competitive dynamics among states, as well as non-state actors” in their “pursuit of geopolitical advantages and security interests within specific geographic areas”. It centres on questions about the “strategic allocation of resources, military posturing, diplomatic manoeuvring, and the formulation of policies aimed at gaining a superior position relative to rivals in key geographical regions or in the broader global context.”<sup>52</sup>

### Traditional and non-traditional security

Traditional security is concerned with the use, or threat of use, of military forces and action. A traditional security agenda is one focused on the protection of a nation-state's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the safeguarding of its citizens from external military threats. Thus, it focuses primarily on state actors and the use of military force or deterrence in achieving its objectives (e.g., maintaining/expanding military forces, engaging in military exercises, enhancing border security, engaging in intelligence gathering, making alliances)<sup>53</sup>.

In contrast, non-traditional security is concerned with challenges/threats to the survival and well-being of peoples and states that arise from non-military sources. These security challenges encompass a wide range of global issues, including but not limited to environmental, economic, social, and human security issues, as well as transnational challenges like terrorism, cyber threats, infectious diseases, and climate change. A non-traditional security agenda often requires multi-dimensional approaches and the involvement of both state and non-state actors.

### Non-traditional security emphasises:

- International cooperation
- Human well-being
- Non-military solutions to security issues: this can involve diplomacy, international cooperation, policy measures, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and efforts to address root causes.

It is important to note, however, that non-traditional security agendas are vulnerable to co-option and militarisation as areas that may be better addressed through other policy frameworks, such as

development, diplomacy, or humanitarian efforts, are analysed and approached through the lens of “security”.

## Militarisation

Militarisation can be simply defined as a process that codes the “degree to which a society’s institutions, policies, behaviours, thought and values are devoted to military power and shaped by war”[54](#).

In this way, militarisation can be understood as the intentional preparation and orientation of a society toward the acceptance of and/or support for military power and the readiness of the military and society for military conflict. There are many facets to the process of militarisation including[55](#):

- Cultural and symbolic elements through the promotion of military values, symbols, and ideologies within a society in order to encourage the belief that military power is central to security, problem-solving, and the nation's identity.
- Material preparation for war through the allocation of significant resources, such as financial investments, technology, and infrastructure, to bolster military capabilities and readiness.
- Political and policy elements through the formulation and implementation of policies that prioritize military solutions to a wide range of issues, even those not directly related to national defence.

Notably, militarisation often relies on the creation and maintenance of boundaries between good and bad actors, friends or enemies and the consequent fostering of an "us versus them" mentality.

## Deterrence

Deterrence in the context of geopolitics refers to the use of threats or the perception of threats to prevent undesirable actions being taken. It is premised on the idea that a nation will refrain from taking certain actions if they believe it to be too costly and can be political, economic, or military in nature. These discussion papers are most concerned with military deterrence.

The ability to impose military threats on others or be perceived as militarily threatening requires equal to or greater military capabilities than one’s enemies. In a world marked by constantly evolving military technologies, the real-world implication of pursuing a military deterrence strategy is the constant pursuit of increasingly powerful military capabilities – in short, an arms race. Furthermore, the constant preoccupation with threats and threatening capabilities that is required of a military deterrence strategy can result in a situation where a miscalculation or misunderstanding in the actions of competing parties could lead to a rapid and unintended escalation of hostilities.

The military deterrence strategies pursued by both China and the US with respect to one-another are further complicated by the fact that both powers are nuclear weapons states. Their military capabilities include the immense threat of nuclear bombs, significantly raising the stakes of miscalculation and misunderstandings.

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- 2 Terrence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, 2021, “Introduction: The Return of Great Power Competition” in The China Alternative, ed. Graeme Smith and Terrence Wesley-Smith (Canberra: ANU Press), 1-41. From: <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n7754/pdf/introduction.pdf>
- 3 The region contains globally significant trade, communication, and navigation routes that are of fundamental global economic importance in terms of production, raw materials, and markets. It is also seen to hold enormous strategic value for the projection of military power globally, particularly for the US who maintain a dense network of military bases, access agreements, and defence alliances that sustain an enormous US military presence in the region.
- 4 Figure 2: Theo Notteboom, Athanasios Pallis and Jean-Paul Rodrigue, 2022, “Emerging Global Maritime Transport System” in “Port Economics, Management and Policy”, (New York: Routledge). From: <https://porteconomicsmanagement.org/pemp/contents/part1/ports-and-container-shipping/emerging-global-maritime-freight-transport-system/>
- 5 Bart Gaens and Ville Sinkkonen, 2023, “Contentious Connectivity—the USA, Japan, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, East Asia, May, 265-291. From: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12140-023-09407-7#ref-CR19>
- 6 Stephen Dziedzic, 2023, “United States remains Asia's most powerful country followed by China, analysis says”, ABC News, February 6. From: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-06/us-asia-most-powerful-country-china-lowy-institute/101928692>
- 7 According to a Congress research report the Indo-Pacific region hosts more than 375,000 US military personnel across at least 66 distinct defence sites. See Luke Nicastro, 2023, “U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress”, CRS, June 6. From: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47589#:~:text=The%20Indo%2DPacific%20occupies%20a,sites%20spread%20across%20the%20region>. More information on the status of ground troops can be found at Andrew Feickert, 2022, “U.S. Ground Forces in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress”, CRS, August 30. From: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47096>
- 8 Wesley-Smith and Smith, “Introduction”
- 9 The Chinese economy is heavily dependent on foreign trade (even for things like food) and 90% of this trade comes by sea (including 80% of oil). These maritime supply chains are particularly sensitive to disruption, passing through a number of significant choke points. Given the Chinese Communist Party’s survival is understood to be dependent on economic success (by avoiding economically driven social unrest), and given economic success is dependent on access to goods and services and given Chinese coastline does not provide easy access to major trade routes/ability to secure access. Isaac Kardon, 2020, “China’s Geopolitical Gambit in Gwadar”, Asia Dispatches, October 20. From: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/chinas-geopolitical-gambit-gwadar>

10 As put by Stephen Walt: “Beijing would have less to fear if the United States were not closely aligned with many of its neighbors and did not have powerful military forces stationed throughout the region. China would be less vulnerable to blockades in the event of war, a significant concern given the constricted maritime geography of East and Southeast Asia and Beijing’s substantial reliance on foreign trade. With fewer local dangers to worry about, it would also be easier for Beijing to project power elsewhere if it so desired.” Stephen Walt, 2023, “Stop Worrying About Chinese Hegemony in Asia”, Foreign Policy, May 31. From: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/31/stop-worrying-about-chinese-hegemony-in-asia/>

11 Figure 3: Prince Michael of Lichtenstein, “Mounting tension in Asia”, GIS Reports Online, November 22. From: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/us-china-tensions/>

Figure 4: Ashley Townshend, Brendan Thomas-Noone, Matilda Steward, 2022, “Averting crisis: US defence spending, deterrence and the Indo-Pacific”, (Sydney: United States Studies Centre), August.

12 Lindsay Maizland, 2020, “China’s Modernising Military”, CFR Backgrounder, February 5. From: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-modernizing-military>

13 A2/AD capabilities are those capabilities and actions that allow a state to deny military access to an area (e.g., through long range bombers or anti-ship missile systems) and complicate their ability to operate in a particular area across multiple domains (land, sea, electromagnetic, cyber etc.).

14 Daniel Russel and Blake Berger, 2020, “Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative”, (New York: Asia Society Policy Institute). From (pdf): [https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Weaponizing%20the%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative\\_0.pdf](https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Weaponizing%20the%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative_0.pdf)

15 Figure 5: Tessa Wong, “Belt and Road Initiative: Is China's trillion-dollar gamble worth it?”, The BBC, October 22. From: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-67120726>

16 Mastro, 2020, “Military Confrontation in the South China Sea”, CFR and CPA, May 21. From: <https://www.cfr.org/report/military-confrontation-south-china-sea>

17 Wesley-Smith and Smith, “Introduction”

18 Ibid.

19 Jessica Chen Weiss, 2022, “The China Trap: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Perilous Logic of Zero-Sum Competition”, Foreign Affairs, August 18. From: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition>

20 Walt, “Stop Worrying about China”

21 Anxieties over the possible reintegration of Taiwan into China has been exacerbated by the increasingly high-technology Chinese economy which could supplant US technological domination. See John Bolton and Derik Zitelman, 2021, “Why Taiwan Matters to the United States”, The Diplomat, August 23. From: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/why-taiwan-matters-to-the-united-states/>; and David Sacks, 2023, “Why Is Taiwan Important to the United States?”, CFR, June 20. From: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-taiwan-important-united-states>

22 Dame Meg Taylor, 2023, “Pacific-Led Regionalism Undermined”, (New York: Asia Society Policy Institute). From: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/pacific-led-regionalism-undermined>



[23](#) Nathan Robinson and Noam Chomsky, “If we want to survive we must cooperate with China”, Current Affairs, August 15. From: <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2022/08/if-we-want-humanity-to-survive-we-must-cooperate-with-china>. Note as well that this response must be read alongside both a perceived and actual decline in the relative power of the US economy and to lesser extent, its military too vis-a-vis China. This economic decline is especially significant because forces greater reliance on the US’s military capabilities.. See also Weiss “China Trap”

[24](#) Anthony Blinken, 2022, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China”, Speech at George Washington University, May 26. From: <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

[25](#) Weiss, “The China Trap”

[26](#) David Vergun, 2021, “China Remains 'Pacing Challenge' for U.S., Pentagon Press Secretary Says”, US Department of Defense, November 16. From: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2845661/china-remains-pacing-challenge-for-us-pentagon-press-secretary-says/>; See also: Michael Klare, 2022, “Welcome to the New Cold War”, The Nation, January 14. From: <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/china-cold-war/>

[27](#) Robinson and Chomsky, “If we want to survive”

[28](#) Walt, “Stop worrying about China”

[29](#) Meg Taylor, “Pacific-led Regionalism Undermined”

[30](#) The US and Japan (and to a lesser extent Australia) are the key actors setting the agenda for and driving the use of the Indo-Pacific security framing. However, the number of countries adopting Indo-Pacific strategies or aligning their foreign policy initiatives with the Indo-Pacific vision articulated by the US, Japan, and Australia are growing. They include France, Germany, the EU, the UK, New Zealand, Canada, South Korea, the Philippines (each with their own Indo-Pacific strategy), India (whose is aligning its “Act East Policy” with the concept of the Indo-Pacific) and ASEAN (with the “ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific”) See The Economist, 2023, “Reinventing the Indo-Pacific”, The Economist, January 4. From: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/01/04/reinventing-the-indo-pacific>

[31](#) Figure 6: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/forget-asia-pacific-it-s-the-indo-pacific-we-live-in-now-where-is-that-exactly-20210810-p58hku.html>

[32](#) Meg Taylor “Pacific-Led Regionalism Undermined”

[33](#) Walter Lohman, 2020, “The U.S.-China competition in the Pacific Islands”, GIS Reports Online, November 16. From: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-influence-pacific/>

[34](#) Australian Government, 2017, “Foreign Policy White Paper”, (Canberra: Australian Government). From: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper/fpwhitepaper/index.html>

[35](#) □ Michael O’Keefe, 2020, “The Militarisation of China in the Pacific: Stepping Up to a New Cold War?”, Security Challenges, 94-112. From: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26908770.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A0de38a43cd849f4a4d0bc38c3acf033e&ab\\_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26908770.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A0de38a43cd849f4a4d0bc38c3acf033e&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1)

[36](#) Meg Taylor, “Pacific-Led Regionalism Undermined”

[37](#) Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach”

[38](#) Although this is by no means a new approach – different iterations of what might be termed “integrated deterrence” have been fundamental to US engagements regionally and elsewhere for decades – what is new under the current Indo-Pacific Strategy is the scale at which this is being pursued and the heightened geostrategic competition to which it is contributing.

[39](#) The White House, 2022, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”, (Washington: The White House). From: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

[40](#) Klare, “Welcome to the New Cold War”

[41](#) O’Keefe “Militarisation”

[42](#) James Batley, 2018, “Review: Safeguarding Australia’s security interests through closer Pacific ties”, the Lowy Interpreter, April 27. From: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/review-safeguarding-australia-s-security-interests-through-closer-pacific-ties>

[43](#) Australian Government, 2016, “Defence White Paper 2016”, (Canberra: Australian Government). From: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-white-paper>

[44](#) Weiss, “The China Trap”

[45](#) Wesley-Smith and Smith, “Introduction”

[46](#) Weiss, “The China Trap”

[47](#) The White House, “Indo-Pacific Strategy”

[48](#) Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

[49](#) Greg Fry, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka and Terence Wesley-Smith, 2022, “‘Partners in the Blue Pacific’ initiative rides roughshod over established regional processes”, DevPolicy, July 5. From: <https://devpolicy.org/pbp-initiative-rides-roughshod-over-regional-processes-20220705/>

[50](#) Wesley-Smith and Smith, “Introduction”

[51](#) Flint, C and Taylor, P. 2011. Geopolitics: Past, Present and Future. *Geopolitics*, 16(1): 5-13.

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[54](#) Bianca Baggiarini, 2023, “The AUKUS deal could help contribute to a dangerous military build-up in our region, making the chance of conflict even greater”, ANU Reporter, May 18. From: <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/all-stories/aukus-is-using-military-muscle-to-stop-war-it-could-start-one-instead>

[55](#) See Andrew Bickford, 2015, “Militaries and Militarization”, *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Second Edition), 483-489. From: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B978008097086812210X>



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