



The Geopolitical Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: A SWOT Analysis of Regional Defense and Implications for Regional Stability

Wisanggeni Sholata Sya^{1*}, Erwin Simson Marojahan², Herlina Tarigan³
Defense Management Studies, Republic of Indonesia Defense University,
Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Wisanggeni Sholata Sya wisanggenisholatasya@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific has become the focal point of 21st-century global activity, characterized by great power competition, rapid military modernization, and complex territorial disputes. This study analyzes these fluid security dynamics using a SWOT framework applied to the defense postures of key regional states, specifically the United States, China, middle powers, and ASEAN, to identify their internal capabilities and external vulnerabilities. The analysis projects that conflict escalation in this region could severely disrupt vital maritime trade routes and global stability, warning that a failure to manage strategic competition risks triggering an open conflict with catastrophic consequences. In conclusion, the study recommends strengthening multilateral diplomacy, implementing confidence-building measures, and leveraging the constructive role of middle powers to safeguard long-term regional stability.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary international relations discourse, the geographical and strategic construct of the "Indo-Pacific" has supplanted "Asia-Pacific" as the dominant terminology. This vast region, stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western Pacific, constitutes an integrated maritime space that serves as a primary artery for global trade and a critical arena for influence contestation (Medcalf, 2020). The geoeconomic significance of this area is immense, as it generates more than half of the world's GDP and facilitates one-third of global maritime trade, particularly through choke points like the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea (SCS) (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). Consequently, its economic centrality inherently makes it a focal point of geopolitical competition.

The primary driver of the region's dynamics is the strategic rivalry between the established hegemon, the United States (US), and the rising great power, the People's Republic of China (PRC). China's ascent, marked by massive military modernization and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is widely viewed as an effort to reshape the regional order long dominated by the US (Allison, 2017). In response, the US and its allies have articulated a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, emphasizing a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and the strengthening of security alliances (White House, 2017). This interplay between competing visions creates a classic "security dilemma," wherein steps taken by one party to enhance its security are perceived as a threat by the other, thereby triggering a dangerous cycle of mistrust and arms racing (Jervis, 1978).

Amid this polarization, other actors such as Japan, India, Australia, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) play significant roles. They attempt to navigate this complex landscape with varying strategies, ranging from strengthening alliances (as seen in the AUKUS and Quad frameworks) to striving to maintain neutrality and centrality (in the case of ASEAN). This paper will dissect this complexity by employing a SWOT analysis to map the defense postures of key actors, analyze the potential impacts should tensions fail to be managed, and offer policy recommendations for long-term stability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Realism and Neoclassical Realism

The principal theoretical framework for understanding Indo-Pacific dynamics is Realism, particularly Neoclassical Realism. This theory posits that state behavior in the international system is driven by the pursuit of maximizing security and power within an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979). The US-China rivalry is a classic manifestation of a shifting balance of power. China's rise threatens the post-Cold War unipolarity of the US, compelling Washington to engage in a balancing strategy through both internal (military modernization) and external (AUKUS, Quad) alliances to contain Beijing's influence (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Geoeconomics

Complementary to geopolitics, the concept of Geoeconomics has become increasingly relevant in the Indo-Pacific discourse. Geoeconomics refers to the use of economic instruments—such as trade policy, investment, financial

sanctions, or control over supply chains—to advance and defend national geopolitical interests. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US's efforts to influence global financial networks are prime examples of this economic statecraft. This framework illustrates how strategic interactions between states and economic sectors enhance a nation's power position in the contemporary international system.

The Security Dilemma

The concept of the Security Dilemma (Jervis, 1978) is highly relevant in explaining the escalation in the South China Sea. China's construction of artificial islands and militarization of maritime features, which it claims are defensive measures to protect its sovereignty, are perceived as offensive actions by neighboring states and the US. This has prompted responses such as increased Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) by the US and naval modernization by countries like the Philippines and Vietnam, which in turn reinforces the perception of threat in Beijing.

The Role of Middle Powers

Furthermore, the role of Middle Powers has become increasingly important. States like Australia, Indonesia, and Japan are not merely objects in the great power competition but are also active agents capable of shaping the regional order. They often employ multilateral diplomacy and coalition-building to promote a rules-based order and mitigate aggressive behavior from great powers, a behavior described in middle power literature as an effort to maintain systemic stability (Jordaan, 2017). ASEAN centrality is a manifestation of collective middle power diplomacy, although it faces significant credibility challenges (Ba, 2017)

METHODOLOGY

This research is conducted using a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. The study relies entirely on secondary data sourced from a variety of materials, including official government policy documents, reports from international think tanks (like CSIS, IISS, and the RAND Corporation), academic journals, and credible media publications. The primary analytical tool employed is the SWOT analysis, a strategic framework used to identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. In this study, the SWOT framework is applied to assess the defense postures and strategic positioning of key actors within the Indo-Pacific, enabling a systematic mapping of the internal (strengths, weaknesses) and external (opportunities, threats) factors that influence a nation's ability to fulfill its security objectives.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

SWOT Analysis of Regional Defense Postures

The analysis of key actors in the Indo-Pacific reveals a complex landscape of capabilities and vulnerabilities, summarized in the table below.

Table 1. SWOT Analysis

Actor	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unmatched alliance network • Technological military superiority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tyranny of distance (logistics) • Domestic political polarization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revitalize alliances (AUKUS, Quad) • Capitalize on regional demand for security partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China's A2/AD capabilities • Overstretch of global commitments
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained defense budget growth • Geographical advantage • Economic statecraft (BRI) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of modern combat experience • Relative diplomatic isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use BRI for strategic access • Exploit divisions within opposing alliances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of a balancing coalition • Domestic economic slowdown
Middle Powers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliance with US • Professional militaries • Strategic geographic locations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic limitations (aging) • High dependency on defense imports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance interoperability (minilateralism) • Promote a rules-based order 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China's growing assertiveness • Risk of entrapment in great power conflict
ASEAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diplomatic centrality (convening power) • Strategic location at maritime crossroads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus-based decision-making • Lack of a unified security policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the AOIP as a middle ground • Act as a norm-setting institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal fragmentation due to external pressure • Loss of strategic relevance

- United States: Its primary Strengths lie in its unparalleled network of security alliances (with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia) and its technological military superiority (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

However, its Weaknesses include the tyranny of distance, which makes power projection costly and vulnerable, and domestic political polarization that can disrupt foreign policy consistency. Opportunities for the US include revitalizing its alliances through new frameworks like AUKUS and the Quad. The greatest Threat comes from the rapid modernization of China's military, especially its Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities designed to neutralize US naval supremacy in the Western Pacific (Krepinevich, 2010).

- China: China's Strengths stem from its sustained defense budget growth, geographical advantages in the first island chain, and the leveraging of its economic power as an instrument of statecraft (Allison, 2017). On the other hand, its Weaknesses include the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) lack of modern combat experience and its relative diplomatic isolation, being surrounded by states skeptical of its intentions. In fact, the PLA has not engaged in a major conflict since 1979, leaving its war-fighting prowess "unproven" in 21st-century warfare, a factor acknowledged by Chinese military circles as a potential limitation on combat power (Medeiros, 2020; Shlapak & Morgan, 2021). China's Opportunities lie in its ability to use the BRI to gain strategic access to overseas ports and to fracture ASEAN cohesion. The BRI Initiative is a central pillar of Chinese foreign policy, leveraging massive infrastructure investments, particularly in maritime ports, to expand its geopolitical influence and connectivity across global regions (Brookings, 2019; Montolalu, 2022). Its primary Threat is the formation of an effective balancing coalition by the US and its allies, as well as a potential domestic economic slowdown that could hamper its military funding. The US strategy focuses on building "regional deterrence infrastructure" by strengthening minilateral alliances, such as AUKUS and Quad, to explicitly counterbalance China's expanding influence and power in the region (Anggarini & Khoirunnisa, 2025; Belfer Center, 2023).
- Middle Powers (Japan, Australia, India): Their collective Strengths are their alliances with the US, professional militaries, and strategic geographical locations. The formal alliance structures, particularly the US-Japan and US-Australia alliances, provide an ironclad security guarantee and interoperability that is difficult for regional rivals to counter (White House, 2017; U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). Their Weaknesses include demographic limitations (an aging population in Japan) and a high dependency on defense imports (in India's case). This reliance on external defense technology and supply chains creates significant geopolitical leverage for key exporters and risks hampering operational readiness during a conflict (Perlo-Freeman, 2021; Panda, 2020). A major Opportunity for them is to enhance interoperability and security burden-sharing through minilateral frameworks like the Quad. Minilateralism allows these powers to quickly respond to common security challenges, pool resources, and promote a rules-based order without the consensus burden of larger forums (Rathore, 2023; Jordaan, 2017). The Threats they face are existential, namely China's growing assertiveness and the risk of being drawn into a great power conflict. The primary strategic dilemma they face is the risk of abandonment by their major

ally (the US) or entrapment in a conflict initiated by their ally, a classic challenge in alliance politics (Layne, 2017).

- ASEAN: ASEAN's most valuable Strength is its diplomatic centrality, embodied in platforms like the East Asia Summit and the ADMM-Plus (Ba, 2017). However, its fundamental Weakness is the principle of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making, which often paralyzes the organization's ability to respond effectively to security crises. The requirement for unanimous agreement leads to the lowest common denominator approach in policymaking, severely limiting its effectiveness in addressing highly contentious issues like the South China Sea disputes (Emmers, 2022; Acharya, 2018). ASEAN's Opportunity is to promote the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a bridge between the US and Chinese visions. The AOIP, with its emphasis on inclusivity, open architecture, and maritime cooperation, provides a diplomatic platform for member states to collectively shape the regional narrative and mitigate the pressure of choosing sides (Laksmana, 2021; ASEAN, 2019). Its greatest Threat is internal fragmentation due to pressure from both Beijing and Washington, which could lead to ASEAN losing its strategic relevance. If ASEAN fails to maintain internal cohesion and cannot project a unified stance, external powers may bypass its mechanisms, leading to a loss of diplomatic traction and influence in key regional issues (Goh, 2023; Ba, 2017).

Projection of the Impact of Conflict Escalation

A failure to de-escalate the competitive dynamics in the Indo-Pacific could lead to severe multidimensional consequences.

1. **Military and Security Impact:** The worst-case scenario is an armed conflict in hotspots like the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. Such a conflict would not only involve the US and China but would also risk drawing in regional allies like Japan and Australia, creating a large-scale regional war. The arms race would intensify, potentially expanding into the space and cyber domains, and increasing the risk of nuclear proliferation (Glaser, 2015).
2. **Economic Impact:** The economic fallout from a conflict would be catastrophic. Disruption to the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the South China Sea would cripple global supply chains, especially for semiconductors and manufactured goods. A study by the RAND Corporation projected that a one-year war between the US and China could cause China's GDP to fall by 25-35% and US GDP by 5-10%, with severe spillover effects on the global economy (Heginbotham et al., 2015).
3. **Diplomatic and Social Impact:** The regional security and diplomatic architecture built over decades, with ASEAN at its core, would collapse. Trust between nations would erode, replaced by hostile alliance blocs. A humanitarian crisis, including mass refugee flows, would be inevitable. Aggressive nationalism would surge, complicating post-conflict reconciliation efforts (Emmers & Tuan, 2023; Glaser, 2015).
4. **Technology and Cyber Threats:** Intense security competition has led to a rise in sophisticated cyber threats, targeting critical infrastructure, government

networks, and private sectors across the Indo-Pacific. This includes cyber espionage, disinformation campaigns, and ransomware attacks that erode trust and increase the risk of conflict below the threshold of conventional war. Additionally, the weaponization of emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the growing strategic importance of satellite and undersea cable systems, fundamentally alters the regional security landscape and introduces new vulnerabilities (Krepinevich, 2024; Raska, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

The Indo-Pacific region stands at a critical juncture. The US-China strategic competition, rooted in a global power shift, has created a highly competitive and unstable security environment. The SWOT analysis demonstrates that while each actor possesses unique strengths, they are also burdened by significant weaknesses and confronted by tangible threats. This fragile equilibrium can easily be disrupted by miscalculation or unintended escalation, with consequences that could shatter the global order. Therefore, a collective commitment to strengthening diplomacy, building trust, and upholding a rules-based order is not merely an option but a strategic imperative to prevent conflict and ensure a peaceful and prosperous future for the Indo-Pacific.

This study offers a synthesis of the main geopolitical findings, highlighting China's economic statecraft as a key driver of change, the continued importance of the US strong alliance network in balancing power, and the struggle of regional actors to navigate the resulting polarization. Its main contribution lies in providing a systematic, actor-specific SWOT analysis of the defense postures, a framework that is highly relevant for understanding strategic vulnerabilities and opportunities in the great power rivalry. The specific policy implications for policymakers center on the need to move beyond traditional defense policies to include cooperative security measures in the maritime, cyber, and space domains, underpinned by a strict adherence to UNCLOS and multilateral norms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis above, several policy recommendations can be formulated to maintain regional stability:

1. **Strengthening Diplomacy and Regional Mechanisms:** The top priority is to revitalize diplomacy. ASEAN member states must enhance internal solidarity to ensure the effective implementation of the AOIP as an inclusive dialogue platform (Ba, 2017; Laksmana, 2021). Furthermore, expediting negotiations for a substantive and legally binding Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea is crucial to prevent incidents at sea (Thuy, 2019).
2. **Building Military Trust and Transparency (Confidence-Building Measures - CBMs):** To reduce the risk of miscalculation, crisis communication channels between Washington and Beijing must be reactivated and institutionalized (Glaser, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2014). Forums like the ADMM-Plus should be fully utilized to promote transparency in defense budgets and military doctrines (Acharya, 2020).
3. **Promoting the Constructive Role of Middle Powers:** Middle powers must proactively shape the regional agenda. Through coalitions like the Quad or

trilateral cooperation, they can provide regional public goods (e.g., maritime security, humanitarian assistance) and reinforce international norms, particularly UNCLOS 1982, as the basis for dispute resolution (Jordaan, 2017; Medcalf, 2020).

4. Enhancing Maritime Security and Adherence to UNCLOS: Given the region's reliance on vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), maritime security cooperation must be prioritized, especially in capacity-building to counter illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and other non-traditional threats. This cooperation should be firmly rooted in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982), which serves as the foundational legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas (Bateman, 2021; Storey, 2023).
5. Strategic Cooperation in Emerging Security Frameworks (Cyber and Space): To mitigate risks in the technological domain, states should establish regional and international cooperative frameworks for cyber security and satellite cooperation. Collaboration on shared standards for critical infrastructure resilience and addressing vulnerabilities in undersea communication cables is essential to preventing cyber disruption and maintaining the region's digital economy (Koplow, 2025; Rid & Shlapak, 2022).

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This research relies exclusively on public secondary data (think tank reports, academic journals, official documents), thus lacking primary data, such as interviews with policymakers or defense officials, which would provide deeper insights into internal decision-making processes, threat perceptions, and strategic trade-offs. Furthermore, the applied SWOT analytical framework is inherently static, providing only a snapshot in time. Given the rapid technological shifts (AI, cyber) and highly fluid alliance structures in the Indo-Pacific, this analysis risks becoming quickly outdated by failing to model the speed of strategic adaptation in the region.

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