KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Risk and Threat Perception in the Indo-Pacific



Japan | The Philippines | Republic of Korea
Singapore | Thailand | Vietnam

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JAPAN

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I. Introduction: Identifying and Evolving Risks and Threats of Japan

Japan currently faces a multitude of threats and risks, including a declining population attributable to low birth rates and an aging society; natural disasters such as major earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods exacerbated by climate change; and energy security concerns linked to a high dependence on imported oil and natural gas. According to the Munich Security Index 2024,[1] Japanese respondents express heightened concern regarding the threat posed by Russia, which remains Japan's most serious threat, as in the previous year. Furthermore, there is pronounced apprehension about the risks associated with China, which have escalated in recent years, placing China just below Russia in terms of perceived threat levels. The implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have catalyzed security discussions within Japan, prompting the revision of strategic documents with a particular focus on potential crises involving Taiwan. Consequently, defense issues are currently regarded by both the government and the public as the most urgent and significant threats and risks.

Table 1. Top 15 risk concerns in Japan. Taken from Munich Security Index 2024, Munich Security Report 2024: Lose-Lose? (The "Change in index score" reflects changes in the risk index score since the last Munich Security Index 2023).

	Index score	Change in index score	Share thinking risk is imminent	Share feeling unprepared
Russia	74	+0	55	36
China	73	+2	50	34
Cyberattacks on your country	72	+5	63	29
Climate change generally	70	+4	57	26
North Korea	69	+2	48	34
Extreme weather and forest fires	68	+5	58	26
Destruction of natural habitats	68	+5	53	27
Use of nuclear weapons by an aggressor	66	-1	33	46
Rising inequality	65	+2	53	31
Use of biological weapons by an aggressor	63	+1	30	46
Use of chemical weapons and poisons by an aggressor	62	-1	29	46
Energy supply disruption	62	-1	35	34
International organized crime	61	+10	52	31
Disinformation campaigns from enemies	61	+5	57	31
Economic or financial crisis of your country	61	+2	40	30

[1] Tobias Bunde, Sophie Eisentraut, & Leonard Schütte (eds.), "Munich Security Report 2024: Lose-Lose?" Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2024.

Japan's security environment has become increasingly complex and severe, shaped by the actions of three key regional actors: China, North Korea (DPRK), and Russia. Over the past three decades, Japan's security risks and threats have shifted significantly. The Soviet Union and then Russia represented the greatest security threats during the Cold War and after. However, in the post-Cold War era, the DPRK emerged as a primary concern because of the development of its nuclear and missile capabilities. Recently, China's rapid military expansion and territorial assertiveness in the East China Sea have elevated it to the forefront of Japan's security priorities. While the DPRK remains of paramount concern because of its advancing missile capabilities, Russia's military activities in the Asia–Pacific region have added another layer of complexity to the regional security.

Among these threats, China poses the most comprehensive and pressing challenge owing to its military build-up, economic coercion, and assertive actions in the East and South China Seas. At the same time, the DPRK, with its nuclear and missile capabilities, combined with the unpredictability of its regime, continues to pose a volatile threat. Russia's military activities in the Asia–Pacific region and its strategic alignment with both China and the DPRK further complicate the regional security landscape. The broad geographical scope and advanced military capabilities of these actors, combined with their evolving patterns of military cooperation, complicate Japan's ability to adopt a unified policy approach by risking the overextension of its defense budget and hindering the efficient allocation of resources to the Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

1.1 Security Threats and Risks Facing Japan

1.1.1 China

China's rapid military build-up and assertive actions in the Indo-Pacific region constitute the most significant destabilizing factors for Japan's security environment. Over the past decade, China has developed a formidable array of military capabilities, including advanced missile systems and a rapidly expanding naval force. These advancements, along with China's assertive territorial claims in the East China Sea and mounting pressure asserted on Taiwan, escalated regional tensions. Chinese naval vessels and military aircraft frequently enter Japan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) and the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, directly challenging Japan's sovereignty. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, where it has territorial disputes with several nations, reflects its broader ambition to reshape the regional order in its favor.

For Japan, maintaining security is directly related to ensuring stable sea lanes

in both the East and South China Seas, making countering China's actions in the First Island Chain a key strategic priority. China's long-term goal to surpass the US as a global superpower by 2049 underpins its continuous military expansion. As a result, it now possesses a range of conventional and nuclear missiles capable of striking Japan and is expanding its missile arsenal to target US assets in Hawaii and Guam. Further, China's navy has surpassed the US in terms of the number of warships, signifying its challenge to established maritime powers. China's increasingly coercive actions, including the militarization of disputed reefs and large-scale military exercises around Taiwan, have heightened conflict risk. Should a military invasion of Taiwan occur, it could easily extend to Okinawa and Japan's southwestern islands, severely disrupting the sea lanes and affecting the strategic mobility of US forces. China's growing military strength, coupled with its ambitions for cross-strait unification, is a critical and urgent challenge to Japan's security and regional stability.

1.1.2 North Korea

DPRK's ongoing nuclear and missile development poses substantial challenges to Japan's national security. Recently, the DPRK launched ballistic missiles capable of reaching the Japanese territory with unprecedented frequency, raising concerns about the potential for a seventh nuclear test. Moreover, if the DPRK acquires the ability to strike the US with nuclear weapons, it could undermine the credibility of US's extended deterrence, leading to fears of a potential decoupling of the Japan–US alliance and, thus, potentially destabilizing the security framework in East Asia.

DPRK's nuclear ambitions have advanced rapidly, with the leadership of Kim Jong-un committing to simultaneous economic and nuclear development in 2016. The DPRK subsequently conducted three nuclear tests and numerous ballistic missile launches and declared its nuclear program completed. Although a shift toward economic development and a temporary suspension of nuclear tests followed during the diplomatic talks with the US and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 2018, the DPRK has since resumed its strategic weapons development, reiterating its commitment to nuclear deterrence. Despite international sanctions, the DPRK has made considerable progress in missile development by relying on domestic resources and strengthening its ties with Russia in exchange for military technology. In 2022, the DPRK formalized a nuclear strategy that expanded the conditions for preemptive nuclear strikes, further complicating the denuclearization efforts and escalating regional tensions. These advancements reflect DPRK's commitment to regime survival through military capability, exacerbating the security challenges in the region.

1.1.3 Russia

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has continued its aggression against Ukraine, markedly escalating with the 2022 invasion. This involved a combination of military and non-military tactics aimed at unilaterally altering the status quo in violation of other nations' territorial sovereignties. Russia's actions, including veiled nuclear threats, constitute a serious breach of international law and pose a fundamental challenge to the international order. These aggressive measures undermine global stability and set dangerous precedents for the use of military force to resolve territorial disputes.

In addition to the war in Ukraine, Russia significantly bolstered its military presence in the Northern Territories as part of its deterrence, driven by the strategic importance of the Sea of Okhotsk, which is home to its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. Over the past 15 years, Russia has enhanced its military capabilities in this region by expanding the operations of submarine- and air-launched cruise missiles on the Kamchatka Peninsula and modernizing its anti-ship and air defense systems on the Kuril Islands, reinforcing its sea denial capabilities. The Kuril Islands and surrounding Northern Territories remain key strategic outposts for Russia, which continues to intensify its militarization efforts in these areas. Simultaneously, Russia escalated its military activities around Japan, as exemplified by large-scale exercises in the Eastern Military District and joint naval operations with China in the waters near Japan. The growing military cooperation between Russia, China, and the DPRK further exacerbates Japan's security challenges, highlighting the increasing militarization of the Asia–Pacific region and the complexities that Japan faces in ensuring its national security amid the deepening geopolitical tensions.

1.1.4 New Non-Traditional Security Threat: Economic Security and Emerging Technology

In addition to traditional security threats and risks, Japan now faces significant non-traditional security challenges related to economic statecraft, as well as critical and emerging technologies (CETs). The fierce power competition for technological dominance poses serious challenges to the rules-based international economic order, with the increasing implementation of economic coercion and unfair trade practices undermining established global economic norms. The rapid development of advanced technologies, particularly dual-use technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum information science (QIS), complicates the global security environment, especially given the concomitant disinformation campaigns (cognitive warfare) and the militarization of space and cyberspace.

In response to the intensifying US–China competition, Japan has heightened its focus on economic security as a means of safeguarding its national interests, introducing the Economic Security Promotion Act in 2022 to enhance supply chain resilience, protect critical technologies, and secure infrastructure. National security concerns now extend to critical sectors such as semiconductors, energy infrastructure, communication networks, and advanced technologies. It is imperative for Japan to be able to counter various forms of economic interference, including cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and technological espionage. A key vulnerability is Japan's heavy reliance on external supply chains, particularly for energy and essential materials such as semiconductors and rare-earth elements. This dependency, especially on China, has made Japan vulnerable to economic coercion, as illustrated by China's restrictions on rare-earth exports during territorial disputes.

1.2 The Perception of Threats and Risks in the National Security Strategy

The Japanese government officially recognized these problems in the 2022 revisions of the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program. These documents outline Japan's strategic approach to the three-pronged challenge posed by those nuclear-armed revisionist powers. When the NSS was revised in December 2022, significant attention was paid to how Japan would depict its security environment both domestically and internationally, especially in terms of its threat perception of China and the alignment with US's threat perceptions based on the US National Security Strategy released in October 2022.

China, which continues to attempt unilateral changes to the status quo in the East and South China Seas, was identified as a "serious concern for Japan and the international community" and "an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge,"[2] which aligns with the US view describing China as a "pacing challenge."[3] However, Japan's NSS sparked considerable debate within the ruling coalition between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito regarding how to address China's growing military power. The LDP, alarmed by China's increasing assertiveness, pushed for stronger language, proposing that China be labeled a "serious security threat." By contrast, Komeito resisted such strong terminology, stressing the need for stable and constructive relations with China. By December, a compromise was reached with the introduction of the term "the greatest strategic challenge" to describe China. While Komeito accepted this phrasing in the NSS, it opposed using the word "threat" in the NDS, fearing it would further aggravate regional tensions, particularly after the August 2022 missile landings in Japan's exclusive economic zone.

[2] Cabinet Secretariat, "National Security Strategy of Japan," December 2022.

[3] The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States," October 2022.

In response, the LDP softened the language in the NDS, focusing on "regional residents"[4] rather than on Japan directly. This compromise highlights Japan's broader challenge of balancing robust defense measures with the need for stable economic and diplomatic relations in an increasingly volatile East Asia. The DPRK, which had already been designated as a threat in Japan's 2013 NSS, was described even more critically in 2022. Owing to its rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, the DPRK is now considered an "even more grave and imminent threat"[5] to Japan's security, consistent with the US characterization of the DPRK as a "sustained threat."[6] Regarding Russia, which continues its military aggression in Ukraine, Japan described the country as "the most significant and direct threat" to Europe and a "strong security concern"[7] in the Indo-Pacific because of its strategic alignment with China. By contrast, the US views Russia as an "immediate and persistent threat."[8] This difference reflects the distinct security environments of the two nations; that is, whereas the US, as a NATO member, faces a direct military threat from Russia in Europe, the Russian threat to Japan is more indirect, which explains the less direct language.

[4] Ministry of Defense, "National Defense Strategy," December 2022.

[5] Cabinet Secretariat, "National Security Strategy of Japan."

[6] The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States."

[7] Cabinet Secretariat, "National Security Strategy of Japan."

[8] The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States."

II. Analysis of the Selected Issues and Current Perceptions

2.1 Emergence and Evolution of the Issue: China

Since the normalization of their diplomatic relations in 1972, Japan and China maintained relatively stable relations throughout the Cold War, primarily driven by their mutual interest in counterbalancing the Soviet Union with the US. However, the geopolitical landscape underwent a profound transformation following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which eliminated the shared enemies that formed the foundation of their cooperation. While Japan and the US continued to strengthen their bilateral alliance, China increasingly viewed this partnership as a growing security threat. This shift marked the beginning of heightened tensions between Japan and China in the post-Cold War period, which were exacerbated by rising nationalism and an anti-Japanese sentiment through patriotic education campaign in China.

Despite ongoing political friction, the economic relationships between Japan and China have deepened, particularly after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Nevertheless, by the 2010s, security concerns dominated this bilateral relationship, with the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands becoming a central issue. A key turning point occurred in 2010, when China imposed rare-earth export restrictions on Japan following a maritime incident, signaling China's readiness to use economic measures as political leverage. This event marked a shift in China's strategic priorities in that national security began to outweigh economic engagement. Tensions escalated in 2012 when Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands provoked a strong reaction from China, including increased maritime patrols and a heightened anti-Japanese sentiment. Security issues subsequently overshadowed economic ties, signaling a clear transformation in the Japan–China relations.

China's military expansion in the South and East China Seas also became a critical security concern for Japan. China's military modernization and its assertive territorial and maritime claims have fundamentally altered the regional security environment. Since the 1970s, China has gradually expanded its influence in the South China Sea, taking advantage of the reduced US military presence following the Vietnam War. In the 1980s and 1990s, China strengthened its territorial control through military skirmishes with Vietnam and pressure on the Philippines. By the late 2000s, emboldened by its growing economic power, it also intensified its efforts to assert claims in the South China Sea by employing a combination of naval and coastguard forces to enforce its territorial claims, while avoiding direct military confrontation.

China's objectives in the East and South China Seas revolve around securing territorial sovereignty, gaining control over marine resources, and ensuring the security of sea lanes, which are vital to its economic and military interests. Control over fishing grounds and seabed oil and gas deposits in the South China Sea is especially crucial because China relies heavily on imported energy resources that traverse key maritime routes, such as the Malacca Strait. In response to these challenges, China has focused on enhancing its military presence and capabilities. Through military modernization, assertive actions, and "gray-zone" tactics blurring the lines between military and civilian operations, China aims to challenge the maritime order maintained through US naval power.

China's growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas poses significant security risks to Japan. The broader strategy underlying China's actions, particularly its aim to establish military dominance over the South China Sea, threatens Japan's strategic interests. Such dominance could hinder the US military operations in the region, especially in the event of a conflict over Taiwan, and would enable China to disrupt or block the maritime routes vital to Japan's economic stability and energy security.

Regarding a potential Taiwan crisis, the conventional military balance already favors China. Unbound by the limitations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, China has been rapidly expanding its arsenal of intermediate-range missiles, a trend expected to continue. These capabilities form the core of China's anti-access area denial (A2/AD) operation. In terms of gray-zone operations, China's proposed peaceful reunification with Taiwan, while often associated with high-intensity scenarios such as an amphibious invasion, could plausibly involve alternative strategies aimed at coercing, punishing, or annexing Taiwan without direct military confrontation. Recognizing the immense costs of large-scale operations, China may focus on subduing Taiwan through non-lethal means, targeting the morale of its people, and achieving unification without damaging the infrastructure or causing loss of life. Recent military exercises suggest a shift toward law-enforcement-style measures such as quarantine and inspection led by the Coast Guard rather than the Navy. These measures aim to demonstrate control over Taiwan's maritime and aerial activities without imposing a full blockade, selectively restricting critical imports like US arms, while allowing the flow of essential goods. By leveraging such measures, China could exert significant pressure on Taiwan, potentially forcing it into dialogue without direct military force. This ambiguous strategy complicates the potential US and Japanese responses, as it does not provide clear grounds for military intervention.

In conclusion, China's growing military capabilities and assertive actions pose a significant security challenge for Japan. In aiming to surpass the US as a global superpower, China's military build-up, supported by economic

growth, is heightening regional tensions. The expansion of its ballistic missile capabilities targeting Japan, Guam, and Hawaii, along with a larger navy than the US, highlight China's strategic ambitions and unilateral actions in the East and South China Seas, as well as its intent to dominate the region. This trajectory complicates Japan's security strategy, underscoring the importance of its alliance with the US and partnerships with like-minded nations. To address the military imbalance and, in particular, gray-zone threats in the context of a potential Taiwan crisis, it is essential for both Japan and the US to engage in focused and substantive discussions aimed at effectively countering these challenges. Simultaneously, they must strengthen their deterrent and operational capabilities by enhancing coast guard operations and prioritizing the stockpiling and prepositioning of air defense missiles and long-range precision-guided munitions.

2.2 Key Public Opinion Surveys on Japan–China Relations

Since 2020, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has conducted annual public opinion surveys on China, offering valuable insights into the Japanese public's views on foreign policy.[9] These surveys consistently demonstrated that the Japanese public's foremost concern is China's territorial incursions, particularly in contested regions such as the East China Sea. In 2020, 69.3% of the respondents emphasized the need for Japan to take a firm stance on these issues; this percentage has gradually decreased, reaching 58.4% by 2023. Despite this decline, territorial security remains a primary focus, illustrating ongoing anxiety regarding China's regional activities. Following territorial concerns, the second-most frequently cited issue involves the advocacy of values such as human rights, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. While slightly declining in prominence, this concern remains substantial, accentuating the importance of normative or ideological differences in shaping Japan's policy approach toward China. By contrast, economic relations consistently ranked lower on the public agenda, reflecting that the Japanese public prioritizes security and values over economic considerations in the Japan–China relations. These trends suggest that the Japanese public sentiment increasingly stresses the security and ideological concerns in its perception of China, reflecting a broader shift toward a value-based diplomacy less constrained by economic considerations. As territorial and ideological issues dominate, public opinion shows a growing apprehension toward China's expanding influence in the region.

In addition to the MOFA surveys, the Cabinet Office (CO) conducts annual polls on foreign relations, including a focus on Japan–China relations. These surveys revealed several key trends in the public sentiment between 2020 and 2023, highlighting the growing sense of distance between the two

[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "FY2023 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy," April 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "FY2022 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy," May 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "FY2022 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy," April 2022.

countries.[10] The Japanese public's sense of affinity toward China has steadily eroded over the past few years. In 2020, 22.0% of the respondents reported feeling some level of closeness with China, but this figure dropped sharply to 12.7% by 2023. Conversely, those expressing no closeness reached 86.7% in 2023—a record high value. This growing emotional distance is likely the result of escalating political tensions that have deepened the public skepticism toward China. In comparison to 2003, when 47.9% of the respondents recorded some affinity toward China, this decline marked a dramatic shift in the public perception over the previous two decades.

The public's assessment of the bilateral relationships has also worsened. In 2020, 17.1% of the respondents viewed the relationship as positive, but by 2023, this figure had fallen to 5.6%. The percentage of those who perceived the relationship as negative increased from 81.8% in 2020 to 90.1% in 2023. These numbers reflect a stark deterioration in the perceptions of Japan–China relations driven by rising geopolitical tensions.

Despite the increasingly negative views on the current state of Japan–China relations, the Japanese public continues to recognize the importance of maintaining future relations with China. In 2020, 78.2% of the respondents opined that Japan–China relations were important, and although the sentiment has slightly declined to 68.2% in 2023, it remains significant. This enduring acknowledgment suggests that, while public opinion may be shaped by contemporary security and ideological tensions, there is still recognition of China's long-term importance to Japan's national interests.

Based on the 2023 Survey of 100 Japanese Companies on Economic Security conducted by the Institute of Geoeconomics, Japanese firms are increasingly cognizant of the risks associated with conducting business in China.[11] In response to the question, "What are important topics to be attentive to for developing business in China? Select all that apply," 90.7% of the respondents identified geopolitical risks as their primary concern. This was followed by 76.0% citing the need to prepare for potential changes in Chinese policy that pose business survival risks and 77.3% highlighting the importance of preparing for a possible Taiwan contingency. Additional concerns included supply chain disruptions (73.3%) and cyberattacks (72.0%). These findings underscore the heightened awareness of the multiple dimensions of risk in relation to China among Japanese businesses, prompting the need for more robust risk-management frameworks to safeguard their operations and ensure continuity.

Regarding preparations for a potential Taiwanese contingency, more than 70.0% of the companies surveyed had either completed or were actively planning simulation exercises. Specifically, 25.7% reported having completed these simulations and preparing a business continuity plan, while

[10] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy (September 2023 Survey)," January 2024.

[11] Institute of Geoeconomics, "Results of the Survey of 100 Japanese Companies on Economic Security," May 2023.

7.1% had completed both simulations and a business continuity plan. An additional 38.6% were in the planning phase for conducting simulations, whereas 12.9% indicated that they had no plans for simulations at present. These results accentuate the increasing recognition of the necessity of being prepared for potential regional conflicts within Japanese corporate strategy, especially given the geopolitical tensions surrounding Taiwan.

Together, these findings illustrate a broader strategic shift among Japanese businesses for maintaining their operations in China while also prioritizing contingency planning and risk mitigation. The emphasis on both Taiwan-related contingencies and the broader geopolitical risks reflects an acute awareness of the uncertainties in the region and a focus on strengthening economic security and resilience in the face of these challenges.

A 2023 nationwide public opinion survey on media-related issues conducted by the Central Research Services revealed growing anxiety among the Japanese public regarding national security, particularly in the context of the geopolitical tensions surrounding China and Taiwan.[12] When asked about the likelihood of Japan being attacked by another country, 78.5% of the respondents expressed varying levels of concern. Of these, 24.6% were "very concerned" and 53.9% were "somewhat concerned." This represents a notable increase of 5.8 percentage points for the "very concerned" category compared with the previous year, indicating growing public unease about Japan's national security. Only 20.3% of the respondents expressed little or no concern about a potential attack.

The survey also gauged the public perception of a possible military crisis involving Taiwan and China. An overwhelming 79.1% of the respondents indicated concerns over the prospect of China using military force against Taiwan, with 25.7% expressing a "strong sense of crisis" and 53.3% stating they were "somewhat concerned." By contrast, only 19.7% felt little or no sense of crisis regarding Taiwan, reflecting widespread apprehension about the security implications for Japan. Furthermore, the survey explored the public opinion on Japan's role in a potential Taiwan contingency. The most popular response, chosen by 31.2% of the respondents, was that Japan's SDF should provide logistical support to US forces, such as the supply of weapons and ammunition, but without engaging in direct combat. An additional 26.9% believed that Japan should not be involved militarily at all, including prohibiting the use of US military bases in Japan. Another 23.3% supported US military action from bases in Japan, provided the SDF were not involved. These responses indicate that approximately 80% of the public is opposed to SDF's direct involvement in military combat, with only 13.3% supporting the SDF joining US forces in military action against China.

In conclusion, public opinion surveys highlight a clear shift in Japan's perception of its relationship with China, emphasizing territorial security and

[12] Central Research Services, "The 16th National Public Opinion Survey on Media (2023)," October 2023.

ideological concerns over economic ties. While the public continues to recognize the importance of maintaining diplomatic and economic relations with China, the increasing anxiety about China's regional ambitions, particularly regarding territorial incursions and a potential Taiwan contingency, underscores a more cautious and security-focused stance. This evolving sentiment is mirrored not only in the Japanese public's declining affinity toward China but also in the increased strategic attention paid to these risks by Japanese businesses. The heightened awareness of geopolitical tensions demonstrates a broader societal and corporate acknowledgment of the risks associated with China's regional presence. Ultimately, these trends indicate that Japan's foreign policy toward China is likely to remain shaped by the concerns over territorial integrity and the preservation of democratic values. While economic considerations remain significant, they play an increasingly secondary role in determining the direction of Japan's security strategies. Despite the inherent challenges in severing economic ties with China, Japan is advancing its economic security policies by carefully balancing economic and security objectives while actively seeking to mitigate geoeconomic rivalry between the US and China, recognizing that stability in great power relations is indispensable for regional prosperity.

2.3 Emergence and Evolution of the Issue: North Korea

Japan's relations with the DPRK have been shaped by two key issues: the abduction of Japanese citizens and DPRK's development of nuclear and missile technologies. The turning point in addressing these issues was Prime Minister Junichi Koizumi's historic visit to Pyongyang in 2002, which was the first direct government-level negotiation between Japan and the DPRK. During the summit, DPRK's leader Kim Jong-il acknowledged the abductions and explained them as actions taken by overzealous elements within DPRK's special agencies. The two leaders signed the Pyongyang Declaration, which included agreements on normalizing diplomatic relations, Japan's economic cooperation following this normalization, and DPRK's commitment to abide by international agreements on nuclear issues. Additionally, the DPRK expressed its intent to extend its moratorium on missile tests beyond 2003.

However, the revelation that several abductees had died under suspicious circumstances led to further tension. Diplomatic talks stalled over the issue of abductees' families, leading to a breakdown in negotiations. Despite DPRK's repeated claims that the abduction issue was resolved, Japan remained firm and viewed the matter as unresolved. Prime Minister Koizumi made a second visit to the DPRK in 2004, resulting in the return of a few family members of the abductees. Although the DPRK promised to reinvestigate the fates of other missing Japanese citizens, concrete evidence

was never provided. In the subsequent years, negotiations continued sporadically but with little progress. The 2014 Stockholm Agreement briefly rekindled hope, as the DPRK agreed to comprehensively investigate all Japanese citizens of concern and Japan agreed to lift certain sanctions. However, DPRK's nuclear and missile tests in 2016 led Japan to reinstate and strengthen sanctions, which resulted in the DPRK halting the investigation and dissolving its special committee on the issue.

Throughout these developments, DPRK's nuclear and missile programs remained a pivotal issue for Japan. DPRK's continued nuclear tests and missile launches, particularly after 2016, deepened mutual distrust. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan adopted a more hardline stance, emphasizing the need for pressure over dialogue. In the two nuclear tests conducted in 2016, the DPRK announced that it had successfully carried out its first hydrogen bomb test and nuclear warhead detonation. In 2017, the DPRK declared that it had successfully tested a hydrogen bomb designed for mounting on an Intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Given the success of such large-scale explosions, coupled with its longstanding commitment to the development of missile delivery systems for nuclear weapons, subsequent nuclear tests are expected to focus on the miniaturization of nuclear warheads. This shift suggests that the DPRK is pursuing the development of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) for potential use in regional conflicts. Until the 2000s, nuclear and missile development was largely perceived as a tool for diplomatic bargaining and the gradual shift indicated that actual deployment was becoming an increasingly tangible reality.

Although Prime Minister Abe later signaled a willingness to engage in unconditional talks with the DPRK, Pyongyang showed limited interest, particularly considering its active diplomatic talks between US President Donald Trump and ROK President Moon Jae-in. Ultimately, despite repeated assertions by Prime Minister Abe that resolving the abduction issue was a top priority, he left office without achieving any concrete progress in the matter. This prolonged stalemate highlights the persistent distrust between the two countries, particularly regarding the abduction and missile development issues. The DPRK, for its part, has viewed Japan's focus on the abduction issue and its imposition of sanctions as politically motivated, designed more for political gain domestically than for genuine diplomatic resolution. Consequently, the two nations remain locked in a cycle of distrust and unfulfilled diplomatic efforts.

DPRK's ongoing nuclear weapons development and missile programs have long posed a serious threat to Japan. Recently, the DPRK launched ballistic missiles at an unprecedented frequency, raising concerns regarding the possibility of a seventh nuclear test. Given that DPRK missiles can reach Japanese territory, the nuclear issue remains a vital concern for Japan' s national

security. In May 2016, DPRK leader Kim Jong-un reaffirmed his commitment to concurrently advance both economic development and nuclear weapons capability while maintaining a strong military posture. During this period, the DPRK conducted three nuclear tests and launched numerous ballistic missiles between 2016 and 2017, ultimately declaring the completion of its nuclear weapons program.

In early 2018, Kim announced a shift in policy, stating that the dual goals had been achieved and redirecting national efforts toward economic development. During a period of increased diplomatic engagement between the DPRK, the US, and the ROK, Kim suspended nuclear tests and long-range missile launches and publicly dismantled a nuclear test site. At the US–DPRK summit in 2018, Kim expressed the commitment toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Despite these overtures, the 2019 summit between the US and the DPRK concluded without agreement, and Kim announced that the DPRK would continue to develop strategic weapons until the US ceased its perceived hostile policies. In 2021, Kim reiterated the importance of strengthening DPRK's nuclear deterrence capabilities, signaling the continuation of the country's nuclear and missile development.

In recent years, the DPRK has made significant advancements in missile development, leveraging its domestic resources and technology, despite international sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. These advancements include the development of ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic glide missiles, as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), all of which are outlined in its 2021 five-year plan to enhance deterrence by diversifying nuclear delivery systems. In 2022, the DPRK formalized its nuclear strategy, marking a substantial shift by expanding the conditions under which it would carry out preemptive nuclear strikes. Article 6 of the newly introduced legislation permits preemptive nuclear strikes, representing a significant departure from the prior policies that largely focused on retaliation. This doctrine now allows for the use of nuclear weapons not only in response to nuclear attacks but also in situations where the DPRK perceives existential threats, including conventional military attacks. Such broadening of the conditions for nuclear power use heightens the risk of conflict escalation, particularly in scenarios where misinterpretation or miscalculation could lead to a rapid and uncontrollable escalation.

The DPRK, having observed the invasion of non-nuclear Ukraine by nuclear-armed Russia, has adopted a more assertive stance, particularly following the inauguration of the Yoon administration in the ROK, which decisively rejected the conciliatory policies of its predecessor toward Pyongyang. In response, the DPRK made explicit its readiness to employ nuclear weapons in actual combat, including in preemptive strikes. A noteworthy development in this context is DPRK's shift in its reunification policy toward

the ROK, evident from late 2023. This shift reframes the ROK as DPRK's permanent adversary, departing from the previous strategy based on "one ethnicity, one nation, two systems, two governments." Acknowledging the significant challenges of achieving reunification, this policy also aims to prevent the infiltration of ROK's popular culture into the DPRK. This profound change is deemed essential for the perpetuation of the DPRK regime.

Moreover, the DPRK bolstered its ties with Russia, as evidenced by the signing of a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty" in 2024, which includes military cooperation in exchange for DPRK support in the Ukraine conflict. This treaty is significant, as it signals a deepening of military and economic relations between the two countries, reminiscent of Cold War-era alliances. Article 4 of the treaty commits both nations to provide mutual military assistance in the event of an attack, drawing parallels with the defunct 1961 Soviet–DPRK defense pact, which also included an automatic intervention clause. This provision underscores both countries' willingness to engage in military cooperation, heightening the concerns about regional stability in Asia. This partnership reportedly enabled the DPRK to acquire missile and satellite technologies, contributing to the development of its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities for future missile operations. Russia plays an essential role for the DPRK as a potential counterbalance to China's influence, which Pyongyang has long regarded with caution. This strategic significance extends beyond economic considerations; it is particularly important given historical precedents such as the strengthening of the US–China sanctions following DPRK's nuclear test in 2017. Securing Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council is, thus, a key objective for the DPRK to ensure a more favorable international environment. Overall, DPRK's missile development aligns with its broader security objectives, further complicating denuclearization efforts and exacerbating regional tensions.

A contingency on the Korean Peninsula involving the DPRK, which is equipped with advanced missile capabilities, could rapidly escalate into a simultaneous, multifaceted crisis, particularly given the complex dynamics of its relationships with China and Russia. Such a crisis could coincide with a conflict in the Taiwan Strait or large-scale military exercises in the Sea of Okhotsk, potentially triggering a broader regional security emergency. In the event of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, whether the DPRK supports China in a Taiwan contingency or misinterprets the perceived weakening of trust in the US–ROK alliance, particularly in relation to nuclear deterrence, the likelihood of missile attacks, potentially including nuclear threats against Japan, the US, and the ROK is not only plausible but widely anticipated. Should DPRK's nuclear capabilities extend to the US mainland, the risk of decoupling in the Japan–US alliance would increase, as would the potential for misinterpretation or miscalculation by the DPRK.

DPRK's military capabilities, including its advanced missile systems and potential weapons of mass destruction, pose a multifaceted threat to regional stability, particularly in the event of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Its extensive missile arsenal, coupled with its saturation-strike capabilities, as well as the use of transporter erector launchers (TELs) and rail-mobile missiles presents substantial challenges to the defensive and retaliatory measures of Japan, the US, and the ROK. Of even greater concern is the belief that the DPRK possesses biological weapons such as smallpox and plague alongside chemical agents such as sarin, which have a lower threshold for use than nuclear arms and can be deployed through acts of terrorism.

In the event of a military conflict, the DPRK may resort to coercive measures, thereby heightening the threat to these three countries. This risk is aggravated by the likely involvement of US forces stationed in Japan, making Japan's national security particularly vulnerable. The potential for DPRK's preemptive nuclear strikes, alongside its deepening military cooperation with Russia, has provoked significant responses from both Japan and the ROK. In the ROK, this has led to renewed discussions on nuclear armament and the possible redeployment of TNWs. Should the DPRK successfully deploy TNWs, capabilities that neither the ROK nor US forces stationed in the country currently possess, it would establish a position of escalation dominance, enabling it to deter US military intervention. In this context, it is vital for the US to sustain a credible deterrence posture against the DPRK, while also providing reassurance to its regional allies, particularly the ROK.

2.4 Key Public Opinion Surveys on Japan–North Korean Relations

The public opinion surveys conducted by the CO on the SDF and defense issues reveal a growing perception of the DPRK as a significant security threat, particularly in relation to its missile and nuclear programs.[13] In the 2022 survey, 68.9% of the respondents identified "DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile development" as their primary concern, highlighting the heightened awareness of the immediate risks posed by Pyongyang's military advancements.

This concern surpassed other pressing issues such as "Japan's defense capabilities" (64.0%) and "China's military modernization" (61.3%). The results suggest a consensus within Japan that DPRK's missile and nuclear programs represent some of the most urgent challenges to national security. Additionally, 52.1% of the respondents expressed concerns about the "situation and impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine," underscoring the influence of global conflicts on Japanese security perceptions. Notably, "DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile development" was also the top concern

[13] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on the Japan Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues (November 2022 Survey)," March 2023.

in the 2018 survey, indicating the persistent nature of this issue.

Furthermore, the public opinion surveys on foreign relations conducted by the CO show a significant shift in public focus—from the longstanding issue of the abduction of Japanese citizens by the DPRK to concerns over its missile program.[14] In 2017, for the first time, the missile threat overtook the abduction issue as the primary concern, with 83.0% of the respondents identifying it as their top concern compared with 78.3% for the abduction issue. This trend persisted, the missile threat remaining the dominant concern in subsequent surveys. By 2023, 77.9% of the respondents still cited the missile threat as their primary concern, followed by the abduction issue (73.6%) and the nuclear issue (65.7%). Despite some fluctuations in ranking, the missile, abduction, and nuclear issues consistently dominate public concerns regarding the DPRK, reflecting an enduring perception of the country as a threat to Japan's security.

These findings illustrate a crucial shift in Japan's public perception in that missile and nuclear threats have replaced the abduction issue as the primary focus. This shift mirrors broader global anxieties regarding DPRK's expanding military capabilities and suggests that Japanese citizens are increasingly aware of the existential threats posed by the regime's missile program. The persistence of these concerns indicates that DPRK's actions have continued to shape Japan's national security discourse and defense policies.

2.5 Emergence and Evolution of the Issue: Russia

The territorial dispute over the Northern Territories and the security threat posed by Soviet Russia originated in the aftermath of World War II in 1945 when the Soviet Union occupied the Northern Territories—the islands of Etorofu, Habomai, Kunashiri, and Shikotan—which are territories recognized as Japanese under the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda. Despite Japan's ongoing claims to the islands, the Soviet Union effectively annexed them, creating a dispute that remains unresolved. In August 1945, despite the Japan–Soviet Neutrality Pact, the Soviet Union launched a surprise invasion of Manchuria, southern Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands, forcibly detaining Japanese civilians and deporting them to Siberia. Although the 1956 Japan–Soviet Joint Declaration included a promise to return the Habomai and Shikotan Islands, no comprehensive resolution of the broader territorial issue was achieved. Tensions escalated after the 1960 revision of the Japan–US Security Treaty, leading to a halt in negotiations and the Soviet militarization of the islands, which intensified Japan's security concerns. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union fortified its military presence in East Asia by deploying nuclear submarines and missiles.

[14] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy."

The conclusion of the Cold War ushered in a period of improved Japan–Russia relations, characterized by increased economic cooperation. However, since the 2010s, Japan's perception of Russia has changed, driven by regional and global developments. In 2013, Japan established its National Security Secretariat and released its inaugural NSS, which identified Russia as a potential partner for addressing the regional security challenges posed by China and the DPRK. Japan aimed to strengthen its bilateral relationship with Russia, viewing it as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in East Asia.

The 2014 Ukraine crisis posed a dual challenge for Japan: maintaining its commitment to the international order while avoiding the deterioration of its relationship with Russia. Japan's imposition of sanctions on Russia, although aligned with the international response, was perceived as moderate, reflecting Tokyo's desire to preserve its diplomatic ties. In response, Russia adopted a more adversarial stance toward Japan and deepened its strategic alignment with China, expanding military and economic cooperation, including joint military exercises and advanced arms sales. This cooperation culminated in incidents such as the 2019 joint air patrols by Russian and Chinese bombers over the East China Sea, prompting formal protests from Japan and the ROK over violations of their airspace.

Japan's approach toward Russia shifted decisively after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In solidarity with G7 nations, Japan imposed stricter sanctions, recognizing the invasion as a flagrant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and a direct threat to the international order. Tokyo also acknowledged that its previous approach toward Russia had produced limited strategic benefits, as Moscow continued to deepen ties with China while showing no willingness to address Japan's territorial or regional security concerns. Moreover, there was increasing apprehension that Russia's successful use of force to alter the status quo could embolden other actors to pursue similar aggressive territorial revisions, further destabilizing the already complex security environment in East Asia.

A significant security threat to Japan stems from Russia's military activities in the Asia–Pacific region and its deepening strategic alignment with China, characterized by an increasing frequency of joint military exercises since 2019, including naval drills, bomber flights, and live-fire exercises near Japan's borders. These activities underscore the potential for coordinated military actions that could weaken Japan's defense posture, particularly as the partnership between Russia and China raises the risk of simultaneous threats from both powers. The global power dynamics following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine have further solidified this alignment, heightening the concerns over coordinated actions in potential conflicts involving Taiwan. Russia's large-scale military exercises in the Eastern Military District,

including those near the Northern Territories, highlight its expanding presence in the Indo-Pacific and its growing tensions with Japan. Joint naval operations coordinated air patrols, and recent cooperative training with China on quarantine and inspection measures reflect a deepening maritime operational alignment, potentially relevant in a Taiwan contingency. Compounding these challenges, Russia's closer ties with the DPRK extend the security threat for Japan from Europe to the Asia–Pacific, necessitating a reevaluation of Japan's defense strategy by considering the increasingly integrated Russia–China partnership.

Russia's military presence in East Asia, particularly its naval bases and air force capability, constitutes a direct threat to the Northern Territories. Tokyo is particularly alarmed by the growing number of Russian military exercises near the Northern Territories. The deployment of advanced military assets, including long-range bombers and submarines, further complicates Japan's security considerations. This escalation is driven in part by the strategic significance of the Sea of Okhotsk, home to Russia's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, which are a key component of its strategic deterrence. Following the 2019 dissolution of the INF Treaty, Russia has modernized its military capabilities and prepared for the potential redeployment of intermediate-range missiles. While Europe is expected to be the primary focus of such deployments, there is a possibility that these missiles could be stationed in East Asia, particularly on the Kamchatka Peninsula, by the early 2030s, with considerations extending not only to East Asia but also to the Alaska region. Over the past 15 years, Russia has expanded its strategic deterrence operations in the Sea of Okhotsk, particularly those involving submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) from the Kamchatka Peninsula. In addition, it has modernized the antiship missiles and air defense systems in the Kuril Islands, creating an A2/AD network. The Kuril Islands and adjacent Northern Territories remain strategically significant military positions for Russia, which has consistently reinforced its military presence in the region.

Japan's energy relationship with Russia presents significant economic vulnerability, particularly because it relies on Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG), despite ongoing efforts to diversify its energy sources. This reliance has intensified since the 2011 Fukushima disaster, resulting in the shutdown of many nuclear power plants. A substantial proportion of Japan's LNG imports originates from Russia and the country's sanctions on Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, including restrictions on energy imports, have further underscored the risks associated with this reliance. Nevertheless, energy and security experts continue to emphasize the strategic importance of maintaining LNG imports from Russia. Japan's limited domestic energy resources and the critical role of Russian gas in ensuring a stable energy supply have made Tokyo cautious about fully severing the energy ties with Russia. While there are calls within Japan to ban

Russian LNG imports in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, the ongoing instability in the Middle East highlights the necessity of securing alternative energy sources that do not depend on this volatile region. Japan's involvement in the Sakhalin-2 project, in which Japanese companies such as the Mitsubishi Corporation and Mitsui & Co. collectively hold a 22.5% stake, further complicates this issue.

In the future, Japan may need to explore new energy partnerships, particularly with the US. Both Japan and Taiwan have been interested in increasing imports of oil and gas from the US, especially that the shipping routes between Alaska and Japan are largely insulated from the risks of a potential Chinese blockade. Should political developments such as the re-establishment of the Trump administration facilitate greater access to US energy, Japan would likely seek to capitalize on this opportunity by securing additional supplies from Alaska. The next critical step for Japan is to assess the volume of energy that can be realistically imported from the US and develop the necessary investment and mechanisms for stable and efficient export logistics.

2.6 Key Public Opinion Surveys on Japan–Russia Relations

As discussed in a previous section, the 2022 public opinion survey on the SDF and defense issues conducted by the CO revealed that 68.9% of the respondents identified "DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile development" as a significant security concern, followed by 61.3% expressing apprehension about "China's military modernization and activities."[15] Additionally, 52.1% of the respondents voiced concerns regarding the "situation and impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine." However, international surveys present a different perspective, particularly in relation to the perceptions of Russia as a security threat.

The most recent international public opinion survey conducted by the Munich Security Conference revealed a marked shift in global threat perceptions.[16] While concerns over Russia's military actions had been predominant in 2022, non-traditional security threats such as climate change and large-scale migration became more pressing in many countries by 2023. Notably, among G7 nations, only Japan and the UK continue to regard Russia as the most significant threat. Japan remains distinctive in its continued focus on Russia as its primary security concern, separating it from most G7 countries. This sustained apprehension toward Russia can be partly attributed to Japan's unique geopolitical circumstances. Unlike European nations, Japan is less directly affected by issues such as climate change and large-scale migration, which are more prominent in Europe. As a result, despite its geographical distance from the conflict in Ukraine, Japan continues to prioritize the Russian threat and its ramifications in the region.

[15] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on the Japan Self-Defense Forces."

[16] Bunde et al., "Munich Security Report 2024."

Japan's proximity to Russia, coupled with the strategic importance of the surrounding region, necessitates a heightened level of vigilance regarding Russian military activities. Therefore, even as global attention shifts toward emerging non-traditional security threats, Japan remains focused on Russia as a critical national security issue.

2.7 The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on US Grand Strategy

Russia's invasion of Ukraine initially raised concerns about its potential impact on stable US commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. It is a matter of the reputation and prioritization strategies of the US and part of the broader framework of the US grand strategy, specifically regarding the allocation of its military resources and the credibility of its extended deterrence commitments.[17] The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has significantly tested the capacity of the US to uphold its reputation as a dependable security guarantor while concurrently managing its prioritization of commitments across multiple strategic regions.

As the war progressed, questions were raised among US allies about the extent to which American resources and attention could be stretched, particularly considering the growing security challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific and the persistent tensions induced by Russia in Europe. A critical dimension of this concern is the potential reputational consequences of US action, even in areas where no formal alliance obligations exist. This is underscored by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's assertion that "Ukraine may be the East Asia of tomorrow," reflecting a broader apprehension that the US response to Ukraine could serve as an indicator of Washington's future commitment to defending Taiwan against aggression.

The ongoing war heightened these concerns, with US allies being wary of prolonged engagement in Europe possibly diverting crucial military resources away from other pressing strategic priorities. While there is widespread appreciation for Washington's robust support for Ukraine under the current US administration, apprehensions persist that this focus may undermine the capabilities of the US to deter adversarial actions by China. Nevertheless, despite these concerns, there has been no significant erosion of allied support for US policies. The US administration's efforts to maintain a strong military presence in Europe, while concurrently signaling a sustained commitment to Indo-Pacific security, have mitigated some of these anxieties. However, the long-term efficacy of this reassurance hinges on the eventual resolution of the Ukraine conflict.

[17] Tongfi Kim & Luis Simón, "Power and Perceptions: How Allies View America's Reputation and Prioritisation after Ukraine," CSDS Policy Brief, May 2023.

Should the war in Ukraine prolong, several critical risks may emerge. Extended involvement in the conflict may lead to weakening the political will to sustain military assistance among US policymakers. A drawn-out war could increase the probability of a broader confrontation between NATO and Russia, complicating US's ability to reorient its focus toward the Indo-Pacific and diminishing their capacity for global engagement and responsiveness to emergent threats in other regions. Compounding these concerns is the ongoing conflict between Israel, Hamas, and Hezbollah, which has the potential for further regional escalation involving Iran. If this situation deteriorates, the US may find itself increasingly stretched as it seeks to address simultaneous crises, thereby exacerbating the strain on its resources and strategic focus.

In conclusion, while the US has thus far succeeded in reassuring its allies in the face of the challenge posed by the war in Ukraine, the prospect of a protracted conflict and simultaneous escalation of tensions in the Middle East present significant risks. These developments could severely strain US military resources and challenge the credibility of US global security commitments. The war in Ukraine exposed the underlying tensions in US foreign policy between maintaining its international reputation and managing prioritization trade-offs. As the conflict continues, its potential to erode the ability of the to balance competing global priorities highlights a critical inflection point in the US grand strategy. For Japan, the US' commitment to the Indo-Pacific remains indispensable, but the trajectory of the conflict in Ukraine and its implications for global order make European security a matter of vital interest, with potential consequences for Asia's stability and security dynamics.

III. Current and Future Security Policy Approaches in the Indo-Pacific Region

3.1 Relevant Official Documents and Policies

The revised NSS is organized by key components such as the purpose and rationale for formulating the strategy and the fundamental principles underpinning national security. In the section addressing the security environment and national security challenges, the strategy identifies two primary concerns: the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the threats and risks posed by China, the DPRK, and Russia. First, Japan positions the FOIP vision as central to its foreign and security policy, emphasizing the critical need to uphold this vision based on the rule of law. Second, considering the increasing threats and risks posed by China, the DPRK, and Russia, the NSS asserts that Japan, in collaboration with allies and like-minded nations, will actively promote the FOIP vision to ensure regional peace and stability and prevent any unilateral attempts to altering the existing international order.

The FOIP vision, first articulated in 2016, reflects the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Indo-Pacific, covering Asia, Africa, and the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Originally based on three core pillars, it has evolved to address the changing dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. The initial framework focused on (1) promoting the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade through collaboration with like-minded nations; (2) fostering economic prosperity by enhancing "physical connectivity" through quality infrastructure, "human connectivity" through capacity building, and "institutional connectivity" through trade facilitation; and (3) ensuring peace and stability by supporting coastal nations through capacity building and cooperation in areas such as humanitarian assistance and maritime security.[18] In 2023, the Kishida administration updated this vision to reflect the new global challenges, reconfiguring it around four pillars:[19] (1) "Principles of Peace and Rules of Prosperity," which emphasize upholding freedom, transparency, and the rule of law to protect weaker nations from coercion; (2) "Indo-Pacific Approaches to Global Challenges," which addresses critical issues such as climate change, cybersecurity, and public health; (3) "Multilayered Connectivity," which focuses on deepening regional ties through enhanced infrastructure and institutional collaboration; and (4) "Security and Safe Utilization from Sea to Air," which expands the efforts to secure both maritime and air domains as global commons through advanced technology and law enforcement. This shift highlights Japan's commitment to fostering a more resilient, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region tailored to meet the needs of Southeast Asian countries caught amid great power rivalry.

[18] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Japan's Effort for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," March 2021.

[19] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)'," March 2023.

Interestingly, unlike in the past, the strategy explicitly states Japan's intention to contribute to the maintenance and development of a free and open international order that extends beyond the Indo-Pacific. Japan aims to play a leading role in the global efforts to universalize the FOIP vision by promoting rules for a fair economic order, enhancing connectivity, and expanding maritime security initiatives. More importantly, Japan seeks to expand its diplomatic outreach to emerging and developing countries, recognizing their growing economic and political influence.

By engaging with these nations, Japan aims to garner support for its FOIP vision and reinforce the rule of law on a global scale. This strategy reflects its intention to strengthen the international order not only by maintaining relations with its traditional partners but also by forging new partnerships across diverse regions.

The section outlining Japan's national security objectives marks a notable strategic shift toward achieving "a new balance in international relations," especially within the Indo-Pacific region. Although not widely covered by the domestic and international media, this objective reflects a sincere and determined approach, emphasizing the need to prevent scenarios in which a single state can unilaterally alter the status quo. Japan is committed to the FOIP vision, adopting a proactive stance in shaping regional and global dynamics in the face of rising authoritarianism and power politics. This is clearly reflected in its Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework. Aimed at enhancing Japan and its partners' deterrence capabilities, the MOFA launched this new international cooperation initiative to provide equipment and infrastructure support to the armed forces of like-minded nations separately from the Official Development Assistance (ODA) intended for economic and social development in developing countries. While current funding limits cooperation on equipment and supplies, a budgetary increase could enable broader military-related infrastructure support.

The strategic approaches prioritized by Japan further elaborate on the methods used to achieve these security objectives. Central to this idea is the concept of comprehensive national power, which integrates Japan's diplomatic, defense, economic, technological, and intelligence capabilities to strengthen national security. This strategy emphasizes the holistic deployment of these capabilities to prevent crises, proactively foster a peaceful international environment, and reinforce a free and open global order. Among the seven strategic approaches, the most closely related to the FOIP vision is the first, namely "Develop Efforts Centered on Diplomacy to Prevent Crises, Proactively Create a Peaceful and Stable International Environment, and Strengthen a Free and Open International Order," which includes strengthening the Japan–US alliance and maintaining and developing a free and open international order by collaborating with like-minded nations. From a defense perspective, in response to the increasing

threats and risks, Japan's strategy emphasizes the need to enhance its defense architecture through three key initiatives. The first is the fundamental reinforcement of defense capabilities. Specifically, Japan plans to significantly enhance its defense capabilities through the development of standoff and unmanned systems and cross-domain operational capacities. A commitment to increase the defense budget to 2% of the GDP by fiscal year 2027 underscores this effort. The second is strengthening the coordination between the SDF and Japan Coast Guard to ensure a seamless response to maritime security threats and other contingencies such as gray-zone tactics. Finally, the defense technology and equipment transfer strategy emphasizes the need to revise legal frameworks for defense equipment and technology transfers to facilitate smoother transactions, while ensuring transparency and adherence to the principles governing such exchanges.

The revision of Japan's strategic defense documents marks a significant shift in its defense policy by the introduction of advanced standoff defense capabilities, enabling it to conduct counterattacks within adversary territories. Related to these capabilities, the revised strategy focuses on three key principles: strengthening Japan's capacity to independently repel invasions, deterring adversaries by demonstrating that the costs of aggression will be too high, and integrating these new capabilities with US military power to enhance regional stability. To realize this transformation, Japan's defense strategy emphasizes three key operational functions and capabilities. The first refers to standoff defense and integrated missile defense. Japan will develop the ability to intercept and neutralize adversary forces from long distances, effectively preventing incursions before they reach Japanese territory. This includes the deployment of advanced missile defense systems designed to intercept threats at extended ranges. The second includes cross-domain superiority and unmanned systems. Should deterrence fail, Japan plans to integrate cross-domain operational capabilities, including unmanned defense assets, to secure superiority across multiple domains such as land, sea, air, cyber, and space. This approach ensures asymmetric responses to aggression, thereby securing operational advantages over adversaries. The third entails command, control, intelligence, and resilience. Japan will enhance its command, control, and intelligence systems to enable swift and decisive action. Additionally, maintaining mobility, rapid deployment, sustainability, and resilience are critical to ensure the ability to deter or repel aggression over prolonged periods under various scenarios.

Most importantly, these new capabilities are part of a broader "denial strategy" aimed at neutralizing an adversary's ability to conduct successful military operations at an early stage. By demonstrating the futility of further escalation, Japan seeks to compel adversaries to abandon any aggressive intentions. This strategic shift marks a significant departure from its traditional defense posture. Historically, Japan has refrained from acquiring

offensive strike capabilities, relying instead on the US for broader strike options because of the constitutional constraints and the division of roles within the Japan–US defense alliance. However, given the widening missile capability gap between the US and China, exacerbated by the limitations imposed by the INF Treaty, Japan's decision to develop its own counterstrike capabilities holds critical strategic importance for the Japan–US alliance.

3.2 Formulation Process, Budget Considerations, and Public Interest

When summarizing Japan's foreign and security policies, three core pillars emerge: (1) the management of the Japan–US alliance, (2) cooperation with like-minded countries, and (3) the enhancement of national defense capabilities. Although the MOFA leads the first two pillars, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) primarily oversees the latter. However, under the concept of comprehensive national power, numerous government ministries are involved. The NSS complements the fundamental enhancement of defense capabilities and, as an integral part of this effort, promotes initiatives across four areas: (1) research and development, (2) public infrastructure development, (3) cybersecurity, and (4) international cooperation (the OSA framework). Collaboration with ministries such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism is essential.

The National Security Secretariat and National Security Council play crucial roles in the planning process. The review and drafting of Japan's three key strategic documents involved 18 meetings of the National Security Council since late 2021, notably those with four key ministers (the Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defense, and Minister of Finance). In addition to internal deliberations, consultations with external experts played a vital role in the yearlong process that culminated with the publication of strategic documents in December 2022. The process officially commenced in October 2021 when Prime Minister Kishida announced during a Diet policy speech that discussions on revising these key documents would begin a year earlier than scheduled. In December 2021, Prime Minister Kishida elaborated on the need for pragmatic and swift enhancements to Japan's defense capabilities.

In June 2022, the Cabinet approved the "Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2022," highlighting the necessity of fundamentally strengthening Japan's defense capabilities within five years by framing defense as the ultimate guarantor of national security. This document emphasized the need to align budget allocation and defense planning with the newly formulated strategic documents. The budget for fiscal year 2023 incorporated corresponding measures, with the Prime Minister reiterating the focus on the content, scale, and financial resources

required for implementing the defense strategy.

Starting from January 2022, the exchanges between government officials from the National Security Secretariat, the MOFA, the MOD, and external experts culminated in 17 sessions by July 2022. Concurrently, the MOD held 15 sessions of the "Defense Capability Enhancement Acceleration Council," chaired by the Minister of Defense since its establishment in November 2021. These discussions were critical for identifying and organizing the key issues related to the NSS and associated documents. In September 2023, the "Council of Experts on Comprehensive National Defense as National Power," chaired by the Prime Minister, was established to explore the reinforcement of Japan's defense posture in conjunction with economic and fiscal policies. In addition to the Prime Minister, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defense, and all other key ministers participated in these discussions, leading to a report submitted to the Prime Minister on November 22, 2023.

The report emphasized the importance of an integrated approach to all facets of national power from a national defense perspective: research and development, public infrastructure, cybersecurity, and international cooperation. It also called for seamless coordination between enhanced defense capabilities and a robust complementary defense system. The report underscored that securing critical supplies, particularly energy, and maintaining international financial credibility are vital for Japan's economic stability. A strong economic foundation and fiscal surplus are essential for sustaining the defense capabilities as core components of national power in times of crisis. As the revised NSS elaborates, while Japan will prioritize strengthening cybersecurity, maritime security, and space security to protect its national interests across multiple domains, economic security plays a critical role in its comprehensive strategy by promoting policies to achieve autonomous economic prosperity and securing vital supply chains, thereby ensuring long-term national stability and resilience.

In terms of budgetary support, the Japanese government has committed to secure 43 trillion yen over five years starting from fiscal year 2023 to maintain defense expenditure at a level equivalent to 2% of the GDP, concomitant with the related expenses from other ministries. To finance this initiative, the government plans to implement spending reforms, utilize surplus funds from fiscal settlements, create a fund for defense capability enhancement through non-tax revenue, and consider tax measures (including potential tax increases). However, while the legislation for establishing a defense funding source has been promulgated, the timing of additional tax measures remains uncertain.

The latest public opinion survey on the SDF and defense issues, conducted by the CO in 2022, indicates significant shifts in the Japanese public's perception

of national defense.[20]

Specifically, there is a growing awareness and support for defense policies, reflecting a multifaceted understanding of defense issues. The survey indicates that 41.5% of the respondents are in favor of expanding the SDF, the highest recorded level, marking a notable 12.4-point increase from the previous survey of 2018 and representing the highest percentage since the question was first posed in 1991. This sharp increase is believed to stem from specific threats, such as China's military expansion and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These developments have heightened the public's awareness of security threats and risks, fostering greater support for Japan's defense capabilities. While 53.0% of the respondents still viewed the current size of the SDF as adequate, this figure represents a decrease of approximately seven points from the previous survey, suggesting a shift in the public perception. As Japan is still confronted with increasingly tangible security threats and risks, a growing segment of the population recognizes that the current level of defense preparedness may be insufficient.

3.3 Advancing a Rules-Based Order: Japan's Role in Strengthening Global and Regional Security Partnerships

Japan's security policy is firmly anchored in its alliance with the US. The US has announced its plans to restructure the US Forces Japan (USFJ) and establish a joint force headquarters for expanded missions and operational responsibilities. This development is expected to deepen the operational-level cooperation between the two countries through closer coordination between the headquarters and Japan's Joint Operations Command (JJOC); it is scheduled to be established by the end of the fiscal year, thereby addressing concerns related to information sharing and cooperation during crises. This is required by the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, responsible for commanding the USFJ, which is operating at a significant distance and time difference from Japan. Unlike the US–ROK alliance under which command structures are unified during times of crisis, the Japan–US alliance maintains separate command chains for the SDF and USFJ. Therefore, it is imperative that Japan and the US develop a coalition-based AI-enabled Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) system. This system would integrate various sensors and shooter assets across allied nations, while maintaining individual control over national assets. The primary objective of such an integrated command and control framework is to outpace adversaries, particularly China and the DPRK, by accelerating the observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) loop. By enabling faster observation, situational assessment, decision-making, and execution, the alliance would be better positioned to successfully employ long-range precision strikes and other advanced military capabilities, for a higher overall strategic effectiveness in the event of a crisis.

[20] Cabinet Office, "Public Opinion Survey on the Japan Self-Defense Forces and Defense Issues," March 2022.

Japan has been simultaneously expanding its cooperation with like-minded nations through multilayered frameworks, including bilateral cooperation, ASEAN-led multilateralism, and minilateral initiatives. Given the prevailing complex security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, cooperation with a range of countries is essential, as underpinned by the FOIP. Japan has sought to expand its role in key bilateral frameworks such as Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), agreements on the transfer of defense equipment and technology, and the OSA framework to enhance its regional deterrence capabilities and enable like-minded countries to engage more actively in defense cooperation.

Japan has also progressively adapted to the shifting geopolitical landscape by diversifying its partnerships, particularly through the strategic use of minilateralism. Characterized by small issue-focused coalitions, minilateralism has become a central pillar of Japan's foreign and security policy in responding to the evolving power balance and rising tensions between major powers. The rise of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is driven by two primary objectives: addressing non-traditional security challenges and strengthening military cooperation to preserve the regional balance of power. Functional minilateralism, as exemplified by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), focuses on non-traditional security issues such as counterterrorism, maritime domain awareness (MDA), and disaster relief. These functional partnerships enable states to address specific security concerns with greater agility than traditional multilateral institutions, which often suffer from slow decision-making processes because of divergent and sensitive national interests. By contrast, strategic minilateralism, in initiatives such as SQUAD (a grouping between the US, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines) and AUKUS (a grouping between Australia, the UK, and the US), is more defense oriented, aiming to bolster military cooperation and uphold a rules-based regional order in the face of China's military assertiveness. Minilateralism thus offers significant opportunities for medium-sized powers such as Japan and Australia. By participating in smaller, more focused coalitions, these states can assert greater strategic autonomy and assume a more prominent role in regional security. The flexibility inherent in minilateral frameworks allows for quicker and more targeted responses to specific security challenges, circumventing the bureaucratic inertia often associated with larger multilateral organizations. This approach has proven particularly effective in the Indo-Pacific, which is marked by diverse national interests among small- and medium-sized countries and complex security dynamics.

Japan's strategic partnership with Australia exemplifies this approach. The Japan–Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation highlights the close strategic alignment between the two countries, second only to Japan's alliance with the US. Bilateral initiatives such as the Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting ("2+2"), joint military exercises, and defense technology

collaboration are steadily advancing. The RAA facilitates joint training and rotational deployments in Australia, while also enhancing trilateral cooperation with the US to ensure coordinated responses to crises. Japan, the US, and Australia are also working on improving logistical frameworks and information-sharing mechanisms to further strengthen their collective defense capabilities, as well as new initiatives for cooperating with the Philippines.

In Europe, Japan has expanded its defense cooperation with key partners such as the UK, France, Germany, and Italy. Japan has also supported European countries' monitoring of economic sanctions against the DPRK and assisted with safeguarding the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea through joint air and maritime activities. The UK is a prominent leading partner in this regard. In 2021, a UK carrier strike group led by its newest aircraft carrier was deployed in the Indo-Pacific region (including in Japan) for joint exercises. A second deployment of the carrier strike group is planned for 2025. The UK has also partnered with Japan and Italy in the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) for the development of next-generation fighter aircrafts, underscoring the momentum behind the UK's "Indo-Pacific tilt," as outlined in its 2021 Integrated Review. Additionally, future cooperation with Japan under the AUKUS alliance technology pillar (Pillar 2) pertinent to deterrence capabilities is anticipated. France, positioning itself as an Indo-Pacific nation, has also expanded its naval and air force presence and continues to pursue joint exercises and other forms of cooperation with Japan. These joint efforts contribute to aligning regional security goals with shared objectives of maintaining a free, open, and rule-making objectives in the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan's Special Strategic and Global Partnership with India underscores their shared commitment to regional security and economic cooperation. The "2+2" dialogue framework between Japan and India serves as a pivotal platform for advancing collaboration in critical areas such as maritime security and cybersecurity. Beyond the Quad framework and Exercise Malabar, the two nations have intensified their joint military exercises and defense equipment cooperation to enhance stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Both have also advocated for the Quad's growing strategic alignment as a constructive force delivering tangible benefits to the people and nations of the Indo-Pacific region. This approach emphasizes the respect for the leadership of regional institutions such as ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the Pacific Islands Forum, while underscoring the importance of capacity-building initiatives for Southeast Asian, Indian Ocean, and Pacific Island nations.

For securing vital sea lanes, Japan's cooperation extends to Southeast Asia, Pacific Island nations, the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, and Middle Eastern countries. In Southeast Asia, Japan promotes ASEAN centrality through

regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus. These mechanisms support and bolster capacity-building, confidence-building, and maritime security. Japan's partnerships with Pacific Island nations focus on capacity-building aimed at enhancing regional resilience, notably in response to the increased Chinese diplomatic activity in the region. For instance, following the 2022 Solomon Islands security agreement and 2023 police agreement with China, in 2023, Japan announced the provision of small patrol boats and rescue vessels to Fiji, facilitated through the OSA framework in coordination with Australian training efforts. This initiative illustrates Japan's broader strategy of offering coordinated support for regional security through the OSA framework in collaboration with other nations. In the Indian Ocean and Middle East, Japan's defense cooperation centers on the strategic importance of safeguarding stable sea lanes, which is crucial for its energy supply and economic interests. China's expansion in the region, marked by major port construction projects in Sri Lanka and Pakistan and the establishment of a base in Djibouti, has accelerated Japan's engagement with regional partners. Under the pressure of great power competition and the inherent challenges of severing economic ties with China due to different geographical and historical conditions, advancing high-politics security agendas at the multilateral level in the Indo-Pacific remains difficult, highlighting the critical importance of bilateral and minilateral initiatives for Japan's security and foreign policy.

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The Philippines

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THE PHILIPPINES

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entity the author represents.

I. Philippine National Security Concerns

1.1 Strategic Outlook

The Philippines is situated in a complex geographical context that poses both opportunities and concerns from the north (Japan, China, Taiwan, and the Korean Peninsula), west (the South China Sea [SCS] and land-based ASEAN), south (Australia and New Zealand), and east (the Philippine Rise, the US, and Pacific Island Nations). Manila strategically sits between two important bodies of water that separate the two principal actors in the region, China and the US. Over the span of at least eight years bridging two presidential administrations (Duterte and Marcos Jr.), foreign policy in the Philippines has taken center stage. Philippine foreign policy has taken overt features over the last decade and been implemented in various formats. However, the cursory interpretation remains the same. The interpretation of Philippine foreign policy revolves around two important concepts: national interests and threat perceptions—two sides of the same coin.



Figure 1. Top 10 national security concerns, Philippines. Taken from: 2023 National Security Survey, Amador Research Services.

Over the years, the Philippines has maintained eagle-eyed observations of security developments, which are primarily geopolitical and domestic, with complications emanating from one or the other. In a national security survey[1]

[1] Amador Research Services, "2023 National Security Survey."

conducted locally across the Filipino security elite sector,[2] the Philippines' top three national security concerns (Figure 1) arise from 1) the West Philippine Sea (WPS)/SCS dispute, 2) cybersecurity and technological development, and 3) domestic terrorism.

1.2 Strategic Rationale

The WPS dispute is a long-standing territorial maritime conflict between the Philippines and China. This revolved around the determination of sovereignty and control over various maritime features of the SCS within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Despite the Arbitral Award handed out in 2016, the dispute persists to this day because of China's insistence on historical rights, primarily through its controversial nine-dashed line. This maritime dispute involves various issues beyond territorial integrity concerns, including freedom of navigation, regional instability, military build-up, and environmental concerns.

Cybersecurity, data privacy, and artificial intelligence (AI) ranked second among the issues concerning Manila. Technological developments have had both positive and damaging implications for national security. Despite the advances and benefits of digital transformation in the Philippines, internal risks continue to weigh heavily on policymakers. There is now pronounced emphasis on the increasing importance of protecting critical infrastructure, sensitive information, and individual privacy. Similarly, despite the wide range of AI benefits, its adoption poses significant risks to national security. The misuse of AI defeats the purposes of defense, intelligence, and law enforcement. The Philippines has grappled with this technology through the pervasive dissemination of false information that has manipulated public opinion in various instances. Cybercrime involving AI is also becoming prevalent in the Philippines, as many cases of identity theft and online fraud have begun to mount. Military personnel and government officials are both equally susceptible to misuse and malpractice. Furthermore, the widespread use of AI bots and AI-generated photos and videos on social media undermines democratic processes and significantly increases political stability, social development, and natural security risks.

Finally, terrorism and violent extremism continued to be high among the Philippines' perceived threats. The threat of terrorism destabilizes society and weakens governments, rendering citizens vulnerable to human rights violations. Terrorist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), New People's Army (NPA), and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) continue to pose threats to people's safety and national security. Terrorist attacks result in the loss of many innocent lives and harm and damage to communities and infrastructure. These attacks instilled fear and insecurity within the community, depriving them of freedom and safety. Terrorist attacks and other

[2] The survey sample garnered 600+ participants, all national security elites (purposive sampling). The survey measured sentiments and attitudes toward important national security concerns emerging from geopolitical sources. These elites are chiefly concerned with national security in law enforcement, policymaking, observers, and academics.

violent extremism—by terrorist groups or institutions—further weaken the state's ability to provide governance and essential services to its citizens, hindering their attempts to maintain public order and uphold the rule of law. In addition to local implications, terrorism, and violent extremism transcend national borders, as they also pose national threats to other countries' economies and national security.

II. Deep Dive into National Security Concerns

The Philippines' renewed external posture is evident in the security threats with which it is concerned. The first two threat perceptions—1) the WPS and 2) cybersecurity and technological modernization—demonstrate a country with keen attention to external stimuli, with the last repercussions for internal security. Last, it is also concerned with 3) terrorism and political violence, which is still largely prevalent in pockets of Luzon and certain areas throughout the Visayas and Mindanao sub-archipelagos.

Table 1. Popular opinion, risk assessment, and project of top three national security concerns, Philippines.

	West Philippine Sea	Cybersecurity and Technological Modernization	Terrorism and Political Violence
POPULAR OPINION *How much attention does the topic receive in politics, media, and popular debate?*	VERY HIGH POPULARITY	HIGH POPULARITY	HIGH POPULARITY
RISK ASSESSMENT *How and when has the perception and/or level of attention changed over time? Do risk perceptions differ between sectors?*	HIGH RISK	VERY HIGH RISK	HIGH RISK
PROJECTION *Is the risk/threat posed by this issue likely to remain, increase, or decrease?*	INCREASING	INCREASING	REMAIN

2.1 The West Philippine Sea

The WPS, an expanse of the maritime area, covers the entire breadth of the Philippines' EEZs[3] in the western seaboard and is part of a wider regional concern arising from China's assertive posturing. The WPS is a region west of the Philippines and a subsection of the greater SCS. The expansive body of water, dotted with numerous land features that have long been used by traditional Filipino fisher people, is afforded by the UNCLOS.

The Philippine maritime claims to the WPS include the Scarborough Shoal (also claimed by China and Taiwan) and select features of the Spratly Group of Islands (with disputes from China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Malaysia), including

[3] The EEZ is an area of the ocean within the 200 nautical mile (230 miles) delimitation beyond a nation's territorial sea. The term is defined and upheld in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Flat Island, Lankiam Cay, Loatia Cay, Loatia Island, Nanshan Island, Northeast Cay, Thitu Island, West York Island, Commodore Reef, Irving Reef, and Second Thomas Reef.

A timeline of events concerning the WPS is presented below.

Table 2. Timeline of the West Philippine Sea, 1991–present.

DATE	DEVELOPMENT	IMPACT
1991–1992	The Philippine Senate did not renew the US Bases Agreement after a majority vote.	The US Bases Agreement had long been revised to include a provision allowing renegotiations.
1993	The last American troops/assets officially left Philippine soil.	The Philippine Senate had voted against the renewal of the US Bases Agreement. US regional presence was diminished, which it had enjoyed since the end of the 2nd World War.
1995	The Philippine government announced in early 1995 that it had detected Chinese occupation of the Mischief (Panganiban) Reef, an elevation in the eastern part of the Kalayaan Island Group (Spratly Islands).	Initially conveyed by the Chinese Government as fisher people seeking shelter from inclement weather at sea, it has now become a full-blown installation short of a military base. The Chinese Government had initially denied the existence of structures.
1996	The Philippine government prompted the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.	The 1995–1996 AFP Modernization Law was the first attempt to modernize the Philippine armed forces. It allotted a 15-year timeline to develop its army.
2000–2006	No significant coverage of the SCS.	China had minimal resolve in the SCS.
2007	China began implementing non-military coercion at sea.	The US turn to East Asia spotlighted China's activities at sea. Speculations of China's militarization of the Mischief Reef arise.
2012	Scarborough Shoal stand-off.	A stand-off between China's and the Philippines' Naval and Coast Guard assets

2012	Scarborough Shoal stand-off.	resulted in Manila's de facto control of the feature.
2012	China announced its nine-dash line claim.	China announces an expansive "nine-dashed" claim across the SCS, drawing the ire of all maritime disputants/ claimants including the Philippines.
2013	The Philippine government announced the Revised AFP Modernization Law in late 2013.	After assessing the limitations and failures that came with the first iteration of the modernization thrust, the second version sought to rectify the backlogs with a keen focus on maritime security.
2013–2016	China upped its maritime assertiveness and illegal activities at the height of proceedings in The Hague.	On numerous occasions, China questioned the merit and validity of The Hague's proceedings with Manila. The arbitration court ruled it has jurisdiction on the matter.
July 12, 2016	The Hague handed down the Arbitral Award in favor of the Philippines.	While not necessarily ruling on substantive aspects of territorial and sovereign inquiries, the Arbitral Award ruled with finality on 1) the illegality of China's activity, 2) the incompatibility of China's historic claims and nine-dash line claim with UNCLOS, and 3) affirmed the Filipino fisherfolks indigenous rights to fish in areas China had blockaded.
July 12, 2016	The Hague handed down the Arbitral Award in favor of the Philippines.	While not necessarily ruling on substantive aspects of territorial and sovereign inquiries, the Arbitral Award ruled with finality on 1) the illegality of China's activity, 2) the incompatibility of China's historic claims and nine-dash line claim with UNCLOS, and 3) affirmed the Filipino fisherfolks indigenous rights to fish in areas China had blockaded. The Award likewise ruled on the illegality of China's activities as the proceedings were undergoing. The Philippine Delegation requested the arbitration's interpretations to properly define, with finality, the kind of maritime regimes applicable to the disputed features.

2018	China began renaming maritime features in the SCS called the "Four Sha."[4]	
2019	China upped its maritime coercion following the sinking of a Filipino commercial vessel.	The Reed Bank incident is the first collision between the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and a Filipino commercial vessel (FV Gem Ver).[5]
2020	China announced the annual self-imposition of fishing moratoria.[6]	China's fishing ban extends within Scarborough Shoal, part of the Philippines' EEZ. China continues these fishing moratoria to this day, impacting economic activities at sea, often with counter-protests from the Philippine government.[7]
2021	China enacted the Coast Guard Law.	China's Coast Guard underwent significant militarization thanks to its law. The law effectively sanctioned the weaponization and militarization of its Coast Guard.
2023	China revised nine-dash line to ten-dash line.[8]	
2024–Present	China normalizes assertive behaviors at sea and inland.	China has used water cannons, military lasers, and intentional collisions to deter the Philippines. Chinese propaganda has likewise ramped up in recent years. The Chinese embassy in Manila has released faulty legal justifications for its position and continues disregarding the 2016 Arbitral Award.
	The Philippines enact a transparency initiative.	Although useful initially, this has only galvanized China to be more assertive in the region. The interim transparency strategy has yet to be subsumed under a broader strategy in the WPS. G7 economies released their statement in support of the Philippines.

The WPS is a vital national security issue worldwide. Coverage has expanded extensively since the Philippine government's transparency thrust was spearheaded by the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG).

[4] Julian Ku and Chris Mirasola, "The South China Sea and China's 'Four Sha' Claim: New Legal Theory, Same Bad Argument," Lawfare, September 25, 2017. https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/south-china-sea-and-chinas-four-sha-claim-new-legal-theory-same-bad-argument

[5] Rambo Talabong and Paterno Esmaquel II, "TIMELINE: Sinking of Filipino boat in West PH Sea by Chinese ship," Rappler, 19 June 2019. https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/233394-timeline-chinese-sinking-filipino-boat-gem-ver-west-philippine-sea/

[6] Ocean, "China engages in fishing ban PR stunt," August 10, 2023. https://oceana.org/press-releases/china-engages-in-fishing-ban-pr-stunt/

[7] Ramon Royandoyan, "Philippines protests China's unilateral South China Sea fishing ban," Nikkei Asia, May 27, 2024. https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/Philippines-protests-China-s-unilateral-South-China-Sea-fishing-ban

[8] Colin Clark, "New Chinese 10-Dash map sparks furor across Indo-Pacific: Vietnam, India, Philippines, Malaysia," Breaking Defense, September 01, 2023. https://breakingdefense.com/2023/09/new-chinese-10-dash-map-sparks-furor-across-indo-pacific-vietnam-india-philippines-malaysia/

During the early years of the Duterte administration (2016–2018), coverage of the WPS had been general, covering developments on the larger SCS. This was consistent with the government's thrust to normalize relations with China at the time at the expense of an Arbitral Award. From 2019 onward, following the Reed Bank incident with the Filipino fisher vessel MV Gem-Ver, coverage of China's illegal activities at sea spurned wide media coverage with viewpoints from experts and analysts, the Philippine government, and, interestingly, the Chinese embassy.

Following the Marcos Jr. administration's renewed conviction over maritime claims and more critically, the enactment of a transparency thrust spearheaded by the PCG, media coverage of the WPS almost always goes on air every few days. The PCG began with the release of ground footage of China's illegal activities such as water cannoning, military laser pointing, and intentional ramming, confirming speculations of China's abhorrent violation of the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGs), and more broadly, free navigation and seafaring norms. Media journalists, both local and international, can join the PCG in areas the CCG often guards.

Today, the WPS is a widely covered subject matter, eliciting a few minutes of segments in nightly news reports covering PCG footage, Philippine government policy pronouncements, and Chinese embassy and foreign ministry statements. China has also bolstered its false views of the SCS, rebuffing the Philippine government at every turn. The WPS has a very high volatility risk. The status quo of maritime stand-offs between the CCG and Filipino civilian vessels is no longer the norm, and the PCG actively patrols waters where China is a common site. As a transparent approach by the Philippines, it has mobilized public support to conduct civilian missions at sea to supplement the Filipino forces in the BRP Sierra Madre, which is stationed/moored on the Second Thomas Shoal, a radical development unseen in the last decade. However, this has galvanized China.

Due to China's failure to move the Philippines away from its maritime claims, it has increased its offensive behaviors at sea, conducting activities in direct violation of COLREGs, such as ramming, unsafe maneuvering, unilateral imposition of a fishing moratorium inconsistent with international law, and even the conduct of dangerous provocations such as the use of water cannons and military-grade lasers. These have long been the capabilities of the CCG, thanks in part to its militarization when China's Coast Guard Law was passed in 2020.

The Philippines is now unanimous in its antagonism towards China. Despite efforts to compartmentalize the SCS issue from broader bilateral relations, China continues to register poor popularity ratings among Filipinos.[9]

[9] Sofia Tomacruz, "Filipinos' trust in China falls to 'bad' as US keeps 'good' rating," Rappler, July 21, 2020. https://www.rappler.com/philippines/filipinos-trust-ratings-china-us-sws-survey-july-2020/

While the WPS had primarily been framed as a territorial dispute, there are broader implications of the national security issue in other equally important areas, many of which involve China in one form or another. For instance, the Arbitral Award highlighted China's environmental destruction of marine ecosystems in the EEZs of the Philippines. The Philippines government is now contemplating submitting a new arbitral case against China for destroying marine biodiversity. China continues to conduct illegal fishing activities and marine scientific expeditions within the Philippine EEZ without the government's consent or approval.

The wider south is also an important facet of digital security through subsea cables. Many subsea cables traversing the region pass through the SCS and WPS. The volatility of bilateral relations and broader geopolitical stability of the region undermine the Philippines' digital security.

The Philippines is also on the cusp of formalizing oil and gas exploration. However, it could not move forward because of China's illegal intervention. The initial push for oil and gas exploration was envisioned as the joint thrust between Beijing and Manila. However, because bilateral relations are fraught with China's provocative advances, joint efforts have not passed.

These points highlight the Philippines' vulnerabilities along with food and energy security and the security of its critical resources and infrastructure.

The threat risk is likely to increase over time. Much of the tension in the WPS stems from the upending status quo that both sides arrived at following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off. Currently, Manila is more vocal about its maritime claims against Beijing, and Beijing is more provocative against the former. The Philippines' maritime border disputes with other littoral ASEAN states have not been as pronounced as those with China.

The projected risks associated with the WPS are considered to be the normalization of Beijing's aggressive approach to countering Manila. More than a decade ago, patrols and net and buoy barriers dominated China's strategy in the seas. The turning point in the SCS dynamics was China's enactment of its Coast Guard Law in 2020, where according to observers, the CCG was empowered with militarized capabilities. In 2019, the Reed Bank incident erupted, stranding Filipino fisher people at sea after their ship capsized following intense ramming by the CCG.

Today, China is normalizing more provocative measures at sea, including light ramming, water cannons, and provocations not previously done. With Manila's foray into conducting civilian missions to the BRP Sierra Madre stationed in the Second Thomas Shoal, Beijing has taken measures to prevent

the Philippines from accessing its military post, including verbal warnings through its Embassy[10] and Foreign Ministry[11] and dangerous maneuvers at sea by the CCG.[12]

2.2 Cybersecurity and Technological Modernization

Recently, government agencies and institutions in the Philippines have been exposed to a high risk of cyberattacks and security breaches including data leakage, ransomware attacks, hacking, and compromised websites. According to the Philippine Digital Justice Initiative (2021), "the Philippines is one of the early colonial countries in the Asia Pacific to obtain and use early digitized technologies; the foreign-dependent economic model under its colonial masters and neoliberalism-oriented leaders hampered the industrialization of the country most notably in the 1960s–70s.[13]" However, this caused the Philippines to become dependent on the service industry, negatively impacting the pace of current digitalization.

During the early development of digital modernization, the Philippines began adopting digital technologies, marking the initial phase of the Internet and computerization in the public and private sectors, primarily for office and administrative operations such as record-keeping, word processing, improved services, and data management. The adoption of the Internet and computerization during this time enabled businesses and other government agencies to efficiently manage all their records and documents and reach other vulnerable sectors to ensure access to essential government pronouncements and policies. As such, in the early 2000s, the E-Commerce Act (Republic Act No. 8792) was enacted to facilitate electronic transactions and combat cybercrimes such as unauthorized access, hacking, and data interference in different sectors and government agencies,[14] but despite this, reports regarding cybercrimes and cyberattacks against individuals, private and public institutions, and the government continued to increase. Hence, Congress passed the Cybercrime Prevention Act (Republic Act No. 10175), marking a significant phase in addressing various cybercrimes in the Philippines,[15] alongside the creation of the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), focusing on centralizing efforts to manage the country's information and communications technology development.[16] However, as cyber threats and cybercrime became more sophisticated and prevalent, the Cybercrime Investigation and Coordination Center (CICC) was created with the approval of the Republic Act 10175 or the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, which served as the primary agency responsible for coordinating and implementing efforts to combat cybercrime across various government agencies in the country. [17]

As part of its policy measures, the Philippines government launched the National

[10] BenarNews, "Philippines probes alleged Chinese disinformation campaign over South China Sea," May 13, 2024. https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/philippines-china-disinformation-campaign-05132024120805.html

[11] Reuters, "China accuses PH of 'continuously' intensifying conflict in South China Sea," ABS-CBN, June 04, 2024. https://news.abs-cbn.com/world/2024/6/4/china-accuses-ph-of-continuously-intensifying-conflict-in-south-china-sea-1756

[12] Bea Cupin, "China tried to block evacuation of sick Filipino personnel in West Philippine Sea – PCG," Rappler, 07 June 2024. https://www.rappler.com/philippines/coast-guard-says-china-harassed-medical-evacuation-team-west-sea-june-2024/

[13] Philippine Digital Justice Initiative, "History of Philippine Digitalization," 2021, https://digitaljustice.cp-union.com/assets/pdf/History-of-Phil-Digitalization.pdf

[14] LawPhil, "Republic Act No. 8792," 2000. https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2000/ra_8792_2000.html

[15] LawPhil, "Republic Act No. 10175," 2012. https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2012/ra_10175_2012.html

[16] Senate of the Philippines, "Republic Act No. 10844," https://issuances-library.senate.gov.ph/subject/department-of-information-and-communications-technology-act-of-2015

[17] Cyber Security Intelligence, "Cybercrime Investigation & Coordinating Center (CICC)," https://www.cybersecurityintelligence.com/cybercrime-investigation-and-coordinating-center-cicc-4732.html

Cybersecurity Plan (NCSP) 2022, outlining strategies to protect the Philippines' critical information infrastructure, government, businesses, and individuals from cybercrime and cyber threats. Subsequently, it created the Cybersecurity Bureau under the DICT to focus on cybersecurity policies, strategies, and operations and the first Philippine National Public Key Infrastructure to enhance security in digital transactions.[18] In the first few years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), the digital transformation of sectors accelerated, negatively impacting the security of vulnerable sectors and other socioeconomic aspects. With the shift to online work in private, government, and academic sectors, the DICT and other legislative bodies have increased their efforts to enhance cybersecurity measures to effectively address healthcare, security, and education issues. The current Marcos administration ordered the implementation and adoption of the updated NCSP 2023–2028 to strengthen the security and resilience of Philippine cyberspace against emerging threats such as supply chain attacks, ransomware, and the importance of public-private partnerships.[19] This enables the Philippines to participate in numerous international cybersecurity exercises and agreements, strengthening regional cooperation with ASEAN and other international partners to combat cybercrime and/or cyber threats.

As technology has become an integral part of people's daily lives, cybersecurity has become a pressing concern for individuals, governments, and various public and private institutions in the Philippines. A Pulse Asia survey conducted in March 2024 revealed that 86.75 million Filipinos used social media for multiple aspects of their lives, from banking and consumer transactions to work, healthcare, and academia.[20] Unfortunately, some users have become cybercrime targets as scammers and cybercriminals have proliferated.

Recently, Congress expressed concerns about the increasing incidence of cybersecurity breaches and hacking by various government agencies including the Philippine National Police (PNP), Special Action Force (SAF), National Bureau of Investigation, Bureau of Internal Revenue, Bureau of Customs (BOC), Philippine Statistics Authority, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, Department of Science and Technology (DOST), the Senate of the Philippines, and Department of Social Welfare and Development.[21] Philippine lawmakers have further stated that cybersecurity issues center on high-profile cyberattacks and data breaches, directly impacting large-scale businesses, government agencies, and individuals.

Furthermore, cybersecurity issues in the Philippines have drawn significant attention from the public as confidential and personal information is at risk of being used in illegal transactions, negatively impacting national security, politics, and the economy. Cybersecurity issues have also become popular

[18] DICT, "DICT Cybersecurity Bureau," https://www.youtube.com/DICTCybersecurity

[19] Ruth Abbey Gita-Carlos, "Marcos orders adoption of Nat'l Cybersecurity Plan 2023–2028," Philippine News Agency, April 06, 2024. https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1222170#:~:text=MANILA%20%E2%80%93%20President%20Ferdinand%20R.,and%20resilience%20of%20Philippine%20cyberspace

[20] Dindo Manhit, "Cybersecurity is not just an IT matter," Philippine Daily Inquirer, June 05, 2024. https://opinion.inquirer.net/174202/cybersecurity-is-not-just-an-it-matter

[21] Llanesca T. Panti, "House probe on hacking, data breach at gov't agencies sought," GMA News Online, February 29, 2024. https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/899044/house-probe-on-hacking-data-breach-at-gov-t-agencies-sought/story/

debate topics regarding better cybersecurity strategies and partnerships. From a political perspective, the Philippine government's response to growing cybercrime and cyber threats is the enactment of various laws such as the E-Commerce Act, Cybercrime Prevention Act, and Data Privacy Act, and the establishment of specialized agencies such as the DICT and CICC, to address cybersecurity issues. The launch of the NCSP reflected the government's continuous efforts to protect the country's national interests and safety. Additionally, the Marcos administration worked on various international collaborations to combat cybersecurity, namely partnerships with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA),[22] Philippines-US alliance on cybersecurity,[23] and Philippines-Australia Cybersecurity Cooperation.[24] Cybersecurity issues in the Philippines have developed significantly over the past few years. During the early 1990s, technological and digital modernization focused on improving administrative efficiency and enabling better record-keeping and data management in the public and private sectors, including different government offices. However, technology and other media platforms have caused a significant shift from positive development to threats to national security and the economy. Today, Filipinos see these cybersecurity issues as the top cause of anxiety among individuals and threats to the national economy.

Recently, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students, educators, and labor workers suffered from the negative impacts of cybersecurity issues in their fields. The emergence of AI and other technological advances has created a significant divide between different sectors. The emergence of cybersecurity issues such as hacking, identity theft, ransomware, and unauthorized access to personal and confidential information has brought fear and concerns not only to individuals but also to businesses and the government. These cybersecurity issues are now considered the driving force behind implementing the E-Commerce Act, Cybersecurity Prevention Act, and Data Privacy Act to prevent their continuous prevalence and mitigate their negative impact on the Philippines' economy and national interest. Today, as cyber threats have grown in sophistication and frequency, attention dedicated to cybersecurity has increased substantially. By the early 2000s, reports of cybercrime skyrocketed, prompting the Philippine Congress to pass the 2012 Cybercrime Prevention Act and establish the CICC. This marked a significant phase in systematically addressing various cybercrimes. The government's efforts culminated in the launch of the NCSP, which outlined comprehensive strategies to protect critical information infrastructure and reflected a heightened and ongoing commitment to securing Philippine cyberspace.

There are differences in the risk perception of cybersecurity in the Philippines by sector, as these effects vary according to their status and line of work. For instance, in response to the threats of cybersecurity issues to the country, the government prioritized the development of comprehensive cybersecurity policies and partnerships with different public and private

[22] Japan International Cooperation Agency, "JICA and DICT team up to make cyberspace safe for Filipinos," February 08, 2024. https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/philippine/information/press/2023/1530968_16864.html

[23] Department of National Defense, "Philippines, US discuss cooperation on cyber security and defense," October 26, 2023. https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Release/2023-10-26/2034/Philippines,-US-discuss-cooperation-on-cyber-security-and-defense/

[24] Luzviminda N. Ventura, "An Overview of Australia and the Philippines' Cybersecurity Landscape: Exploring Areas for Cooperation," Center for International Relations & Strategic Studies, May 2023. https://fsi.gov.ph/2023/06/02/an-overview-of-australia-and-the-philippines-cybersecurity-landscape-exploring-areas-for-cooperation/

institutions, as well as international cooperation. In general, the government recognizes the critical importance of cybersecurity for national security and economic stability. National leaders including the Philippines' lawmakers acted on the prevalent and ongoing reports on cybercrime and cyber threats by creating specialized agencies such as DICT and CICC and enacting laws such as the Cybercrime Prevention Act, E-Commerce Act, and Data Privacy Act. As such, in recent reports, most of the country's political leaders emphasized the need for robust cybersecurity measures to safeguard sensitive and confidential government and personal data. Second, as reflected in the surveys, public opinion shows that many Filipinos are concerned about the negative impacts of unaddressed cybersecurity issues and emerging schemes by cybercriminals on various social media or media platforms.

These concerns have grown significantly over the past few years as technology has become integral to daily life. The widespread use of social media and online services in the Philippines has increased individual awareness of cyber risk. Today, society sees cybersecurity as integral to protecting personal data, privacy, and other daily activities such as healthcare, education, and banking. Finally, security experts' primary focus on cybersecurity is its technical and strategic aspects. Their perceptions are primarily shaped by increasing and emerging cyber threat, including supply chain attacks, hacking, and ransomware, which primarily target large-scale businesses, government agency websites, and high-profile individual accounts. Today, most security experts advocate advanced security measures, continuous monitoring, and international collaboration to combat cybercrime and threats effectively.

Recently, reports of cyberattacks and data breaches infringing on personal and privacy rights have increased. These activities are considered phishing through text messages or emails, whereby cybercriminals introduce themselves as members or representatives of an established company or agency to defraud individuals for their personal information, leading them to access the personal accounts of the victims and use them for illegal transactions or activities. In addition, other concerns regarding this are that aggressive cybersecurity policies such as Mandatory SIM Registration might infringe on individual privacy. Critics of these laws raise concerns about the record-keeping and data management of personal information in SIM card registrations. Questions include: "How can we be sure that our personal information in the SIM registration is protected if government agencies are also being victimized by cybercrime or hacking?" Economic costs regarding cybersecurity measures are a topic of debate because businesses, especially SMEs, are particularly vulnerable to cybercrime, resulting in significant financial losses. Included as well in the debate are "how cybersecurity measures may protect economic interests and how these measures can be adopted by businesses and other institutions to bolster cybersecurity defenses effectively" and "how the government could provide or assist these

businesses and institutions to kick start their cybersecurity defenses and measures through financial, technological, or resource support."

Moreover, debates on cybersecurity have focused on the effectiveness of existing cybersecurity laws and need for new regulations to address the evolving cyber threats in the Philippines. Some have suggested enhancing the Cybercrime Prevention Act through stricter implementation and monitoring mechanisms. Therefore, significant debate exists on the need for more comprehensive cybersecurity training and education programs. Critics have asserted that the Philippine government must invest more in education and training programs to equip individuals with the necessary skills to address cybersecurity issues. Debates also include suggestions for the government to incorporate cybersecurity into school curricula and offer specialized training programs to young and other professionals. Raising public awareness of cybersecurity risks and adequate practices is another topic of debate. Effective public education campaigns, which are commonly observed through advocates from NGOs and other civil society organizations, are essential for reducing the vulnerability of individuals and organizations to cybercrimes and cyber threats.

The risks/threats posed by cybersecurity issues in the Philippines will likely increase soon as the Philippines undergoes rapid digital transformation accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased online activities across various sectors including education, healthcare, and commerce. The sudden shift from traditional to online work and classes has heightened cybercriminals' illegal digital activities, affecting almost all aspects of the Philippine economy and security. Cyber threats are increasingly being reported, targeting ordinary citizens, small- and large-scale businesses, and government agencies and institutions. Today, cybercriminals employ more advanced techniques such as targeted phishing, ransomware, hacking, and supply chain attacks.

Moreover, as the Philippine economy grows and becomes more interconnected with the global economy, it has become an attractive target for cybercriminals. Current reports involve scamming and phishing campaigns using the names of big conglomerates or businesses such as BDO, BPI, PayPal, Google, Microsoft, Netflix, and Apple. Most illegal cyber activities involve financial banking, financial transactions, or insurance. As the Philippine market becomes more diverse, many cybercriminals have adopted advanced mechanisms to acquire financing from individuals and other institutions. Further, the country's increased international trade and investment can introduce new cybersecurity vulnerabilities through complex supply chains and digital ecosystems. In addition, the region's current geopolitical and maritime disputes such as the SCS/WPS dispute have contributed to increased cyber threats to national security. Recently, there have also been reports of cyber threats from Chinese citizens.

In addition, the Philippines still needs a solid and effective mechanism to secure critical infrastructure sectors; hence, cyber threats and attacks will be inevitable in the coming years unless the government can invest in them.

Cyber threats are not just a problem in the Philippines; they are also a global issue, and international collaboration is essential to combat them effectively. Although the Philippines has engaged in numerous international cybersecurity exercises and agreements with JICA, the US, and Australia, maintaining and strengthening these partnerships is critical for addressing cross-border cyber threats. The country needs to implement advanced and improved cybersecurity measures immediately because if cybercrimes and cyber threats cannot be stopped now, what about in the next few years? Crimes committed by cybercriminals will only worsen, and their impact on the Philippines' economy and security will become even more significant. The evolution of these threats means that more than traditional security measures are needed, and the Philippines now needs advanced and adaptive cybersecurity mechanisms to ensure national interest.

2.3 Terrorism and Political Violence

Political violence and terrorism have long plagued the Philippines. Centuries of resistance to colonial powers and the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. laid the groundwork for ongoing separatist movements and political instability. The 1983 assassination of opposition leader Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. serves as a stark example of this period's volatility, sparking public outrage and contributing to Marcos Sr.'s downfall. However, against the background of political dissent and revolution from the early 1970s to 1990s, Asia's longest-running communist insurgency was waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP); its armed wing the NPA, and its political front the National Democratic Front (NDF). During the same period, The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its breakaway faction the MILF played a major role in Mindanao's decades-long struggle for an independent Muslim state or autonomous region.

Meanwhile, the political landscape of the Philippines drastically changed when following the September 11 attacks, the Philippines allied with the US in the global "War on Terror." This involved increased military cooperation and intelligence sharing to address emerging threats such as the ASG. This Islamist extremist group gained notoriety in the 1990s for kidnapping, bombing, and violent activities. Their emergence marked a shift towards terror tactics in the Philippines. Moving on, in the 2010s, several terrorist attack events occurred. A prominent incident was the Mamasapano clash in 2015, in which 44 SAF troops were killed in an anti-terrorism operation in Maguindanao, highlighting the continued challenges of peace talks and counter-terrorism efforts.

Finally, recent developments denote both significant progress and fallbacks towards curbing political violence and terrorism in the Philippines under Duterte's administration. Former President Duterte's administration saw the Maute Group's siege of Marawi City in 2017, which marked a major escalation in terrorist activity, requiring a large-scale military response. Additionally, Duterte focused heavily on a violent drug war campaign, leading to a significant number of human rights violations and concerns and paving the way for new emergent channels for political violence.

Political violence and terrorism in the Philippines have received substantial attention in politics, media, and popular debates, highlighting the complexities of these issues. Beginning with political discourse and activities, the activities of separatist groups such as the ASG, MILF, and MNLF were central to national security discussions. The Mamasapano clash led to extensive investigations and Congressional hearings. This incident highlights operational lapses and strained peace negotiations in Mindanao. Similarly, the siege of Marawi by the Maute group prompted the declaration of martial law in Mindanao and initiated extensive political debates regarding rehabilitation efforts and counter-terrorism strategies. As for recent developments, the Duterte administration's war on drugs has been a core policy focus, drawing both substantial political support and criticism and even attracting considerable scrutiny from international human rights organizations. This prompted the Duterte administration to withdraw the Philippines from the International Criminal Court, which expressed plans to probe the war on drugs. This probe is underway, with President Marcos Jr.'s administration remaining passive in cooperating therein and reiterating its capabilities to investigate violations.[25]

Conversely, media coverage has been extensive, often sensationalizing violent activities such as bombings and kidnappings perpetrated by these groups. State media has been extensive and polarized, presenting these activities as battles against "terrorists" and as directly threatening civilian safety, thereby legitimizing strong military responses.[26] Reports on incidents such as the Mamasapano clash and Marawi siege have focused on casualties, destruction, operational failures, and the impact on peace processes and rehabilitation efforts. This narrative differs from that of the independent media, which often present more critical views, scrutinize government actions, and highlight potential human rights violations.

Finally, amidst recorded incidents of political violence and terrorism, public awareness and concern are heightened due to frequent and vivid media reports and political rhetoric. Debates focus on the effectiveness and human rights implications of the government's counter-terrorism measures, reflecting divided public opinion on the balance between security and civil liberties. Moreover, prominent public concern and debate are centered on the stringent military response and its long-term implications for Mindanao.

[25] "House Panel Ready to Probe into Anti-drug War, Extra-judicial Killings." INQUIRER.Net. May 17, 2024. https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1941344/house-panel-ready-to-probe-into-anti-drug-war-extra-judicial-killings

[26] Montiel, Cristina J., Erwine S. Dela Paz, and Jose S. Medriano. 2022. "Narrative expansion and 'terrorist' labeling: Discursive conflict escalation by state media." Journal of Social and Political Psychology 10(2): 518–35. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.5577

Discussions include the effectiveness of martial law and adequacy of the government's rehabilitation efforts. Regarding recent events, public debate continues on the effectiveness and implications of government strategies, specifically with new cases of activists (many youth) red-tagged as terrorists by the Anti-Terror Council and the National Task Force To End Local Communist Armed Conflict, eventually reported as killed,[27] and the deathly bombing of a Catholic church in Marawi by ISIS-affiliated militants.[28] Political violence in the Philippines has been shaped by long-standing internal insurgencies and the increasing influence of international terrorism. There has been a transition from traditional forms of warfare to modern terrorism, in which violence is primarily directed against non-combatants. Attacks have shifted towards smaller, covert terrorist units that engage in high-impact attacks for political and propaganda purposes. The 2017 Marawi siege marked a significant turning point, exemplifying the global reach of terrorism and underscoring the need for international cooperation. Government responses include increased militarization, peace negotiations, and counter-terrorism legislation such as the Human Security Act, Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) aimed at addressing the root causes of the Moro conflict,[29] and the most recent Anti-Terrorism Act, which has received much public opposition given the possible implications for the silencing of dissent and press and speech freedom.[30] Additionally, the Manila Declaration and ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter-Terrorism have served as steps towards regional collaboration against terrorism.

Data from the Global Terrorism Database indicate a profound 57% decline in major attacks from 2015 to 2020; however, low-level violence persists, particularly in restive regions.[31] Additionally, National Risk Assessment reports assess money laundering and terrorist financing (TF) risks in the country. These reports indicate high terrorism financing vulnerability, with terrorist groups employing both illegal methods such as kidnapping and extortion, and legitimate avenues such as non-profit organizations and business fronts to raise funds.[32] Despite the significant threats posed by these groups, the prosecution and reporting of suspicious transactions remain minimal.

Several key risk factors exacerbate the threat of political violence and terrorism in the Philippines. Underdevelopment and inequality fuel grievances that provide fertile grounds for recruitment by extremist groups. Ungovernable areas offer safe havens for armed groups and facilitate the flow of weapons and illicit materials. The proliferation of small arms contributes to violence and criminal activities, while online and offline propaganda targeting vulnerable populations leads to radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist organizations.

Finally, stakeholder perceptions varied significantly, reflecting different priorities and roles. The Philippine government prioritizes national security

[27] "Philippines: Harassment and Criminalisation of Activists Persist Despite Concerns Raised by UN Rights Experts - Civicus Monitor." n.d. Civicus Monitor. https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/philippines-harassment-and-criminalisation-of-activists-persist-despite-concerns-raised-by-un-rights-experts/

[28] Simonette, By Joel Guinto and Virma. 2023. "Mindanao: Four Killed in Explosion at Catholic Mass in Philippines." December 3, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67604592

[29] The Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations. 2020. "Measures Undertaken by the Philippine Government to Eliminate International Terrorism." United Nations - Office of Counter-Terrorism. https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/75/int_terrorism/philippines_e.pdf

[30] Mendoza, Ronald U. et al. "Counterterrorism in the Philippines: Review of Key Issues." Perspectives on Terrorism 15(1) (2021): 49–64. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26984797

[31] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "Global Terrorism Database," https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/GTD

[32] "The Philippines Second National Risk Assessment on Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing." 2017. Anti-Money Laundering Council | Republic of the Philippines. http://www.amlc.gov.ph/images/PDFs/NRAReport20152016.pdf

and stability by focusing on legal enforcement and military action. Civil society emphasizes human rights, poverty reduction, and peaceful conflict resolution strategies. Political parties' approaches vary based on ideology and regional interests, with some advocating stronger military responses and others more inclusive peace processes. Security experts recommend a balanced approach combining immediate security measures with long-term strategies to address the root causes of terrorism.

Several key debates have defined the current approach to addressing political violence and terrorism in the Philippines. The first focuses on the optimal balance among security, upholding human rights, and development. The government's counter-terrorism strategies, particularly those involving stringent military responses and the implementation of martial law in Mindanao, have been criticized for potential human rights abuses. Activists and civil society groups argue that these measures often lead to the infringement of civil liberties, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings. Moreover, critics have highlighted that militarization alone does not address the underlying socioeconomic issues that contribute to radicalization and insurgency. Issues such as poverty, inequality, and a lack of education are critical drivers of terrorism and insurgency. Proponents of this view advocate a more comprehensive approach: development programs, education, and economic opportunities as long-term solutions to prevent radicalization and build resilient communities.[33]

The other debate revolves around peace negotiations. While many view them as essential to achieving lasting peace, questions remain about their inclusivity and effectiveness. Implementing the BOL and establishing the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) are steps towards addressing historical grievances. However, major obstacles are being faced, such as budget constraints and resistance from phased-out BARMM employees, slow implementation of the normalization track, and incomplete decommissioning of MILF combatants. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed key programs and effective communication with communities remains difficult despite efforts to engage civil society organizations and improve outreach.[34]

Conversely, the debate on autonomy and federalism is pertinent to the broader discussion of political violence and terrorism. Advocates of the Federal Constitution argue that the current unitary system alienates the Bangsamoro people and other ethnic communities, fostering neglect and discrimination against the Christian Filipino majority. They believe this system enables political warlords and corruption, exacerbating conflicts such as the Moro rebellion. Proponents suggest that federal and parliamentary governments could address these issues by improving governance, strengthening the rule of law, and holding leaders accountable, thus reducing corruption and displacing local warlords.[35]

[33] Mendoza, Ronald U.et al., "Counterterrorism in the Philippines," 54–61.

[34] "The Philippines' Bangsamoro Transition Authority's Expectation Management Challenge." July 2022. United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/philippines-bangsamoro-transition-authoritys-expectation-management-challenge

[35] Buat, Mohd. Musib. n.d. "Federalism as a Bangsamoro option." Office of The Ombudsman. https://www.ombudsman.gov.ph/UNDP4/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Federalism-Option.pdf

However, there are concerns about the potential for increased regionalism and ability of local governments to effectively manage increased autonomy without exacerbating conflicts.

Looking ahead, the future trends in terrorism and political violence in the Philippines present a complex landscape. In the Southern Philippines, the Moro-Islamist insurgency could potentially see a reduction in violence if negotiations between the MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority and non-IS-affiliated Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters factions succeed. However, challenges persist with the ASG in the Sulu Archipelago, likely leading to continued military confrontations. Moreover, the influence of ISIS and its evolving tactics, as demonstrated during the 2017 Marawi Siege, poses ongoing challenges to security forces. Conversely, the current administration's hardened stance and increased surveillance against the CPP-NPA-NDF may escalate tensions, potentially resulting in the revival of urban assassinations and targeted violence in major cities.[36] Amidst these complexities, enhancing international cooperation and interagency coordination, continuous evaluation, and adaptation of counter-terrorism strategies remain pivotal for effectively addressing the persistent threat of terrorism and political violence to achieve sustainable and lasting peace in the Philippines.

[36] Alifandi, Anton. 2021. "Terrorism in the Philippines: Examining the data and what to expect in the coming years." S&P Global. S&P Global Market Intelligence. https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/terrorism-philippines-examining-data.html

III. Strategic Assessment

The Philippines' national security policies may be challenging to track because of political undercurrents. Much like advanced liberal democracies, the Philippines is still beholden to the dynamics between internal and external challenges. However, there are important policy documents on which observers can always fall back to better understand the Philippines despite the political quagmire. Once the political cycle renews every six years, the new administration develops a policy document that lays out its vision of the Philippines, its place in the regional and international theater, and the perceived threats that could impact national interests.

The National Security Policy (NSP),[37] the first of two important documents of the Philippines, lays out the new administration's vision of the country and identifies the threats it perceives in the region, the world, and among members of the international community. It broadly covers national security across various sectors including defense, environment, foreign affairs, society, culture, and the economy. The NSP is issued once every six years and is drafted by the National Security Council, a coordinating and advisory body for the President's Office. The Aquino III, Duterte, and Marcos Jr. governments issued their respective NSPs.

The second of two important documents is a National Security Strategy (NSS). The NSS operationalized the first document in concrete steps for government agencies to follow and adapt. It steers and directs the government—both national and local—in the way it should and must ideally uphold national security. The Aquino III and Duterte administrations issued their versions of the NSS, but the Marcos Jr administration has yet to issue its own.

Table 3. Level of policy development, strategic measures, and institutions addressing the top three national security concerns, Philippines.

ISSUE AREAS	Policy	Strategic Measures	Institutions and Actors
West Philippine Sea	Developed	Robust	Robust
Cybersecurity	Developing	Developing	Developing
Terrorism and Political Violence	Developed	Robust	Developed

All government actions, initiatives, and undertakings emerge from these two important policy documents. Guided by the NSP and NSS, the Philippine government employs a comprehensive framework of policies that instruct

[37] National Security Council, "National Security Policy 2023–2028," 2023. https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS_NSP/National_Security_Policy_Manual_FINAL_E-COPY_with_WATERMARK_140823.pdf

national and local government instruments regarding its national security responsibilities. The outlined issue areas hint at the government's unique process of prioritization and securitization, so the set of policies developed to respond to national security issues likewise belies the extent to which these policies are developed.

3.1 The West Philippine Sea

The Philippines has two lines of defense against WPS issues: coordination and enforcement. Together, the two fronts draw upon both domestic and international laws to enforce maritime claims in the WPS and broadly to all maritime domain spaces.

The Office of the President spearheads the coordinating front as the foremost authority on Philippine foreign policy, whose efforts are supplemented, upheld, and bolstered by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). All matters in international affairs are coordinated through the DFA. Subsequent government agencies followed the president's foreign policy directives, including the Department of Justice for submitting international cases, National Security Council, and National Task Force on the WPS (NTF-WPS).

The enforcement front is divided into two main groups and deployed depending on the situational context: civilian, non-military, and military. Civilian or non-military enforcers play a significant role in law enforcement during times of peace. This includes the PCG (under the Department of Transportation), Maritime Group of the PNP (under the Department of the Interior and Local Government), and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (under the Department of Environment and Natural Resources). Military forces are deployed during wartime scenarios, and their roles in peacetime operations are limited (usually humanitarian assistance and disaster relief). This mainly involves assets and forces from the Philippines' armed forces including the Philippine Navy, Philippine Air Force, and Philippine Marine Corps.

The authority intervening between the coordination and enforcement fronts is managed by the Presidential Office for Maritime Concerns (POMC; Executive Order No. 57),[38] initially called the National Coast Watch System. The POMC focuses on maritime domain awareness, intelligence, and coordination across all government agencies.The Philippines' emphasis on maritime characteristics has only developed in the last decade following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal. Since then, the Philippines has placed a premium on policy pronouncements from the national government.

[38] LawPhil, "Executive Order No. 57," https://lawphil.net/executive/execord/eo2024/eo_57_2024.html

Manila is constitutionally bound to pursue an independent foreign policy subservient to national interests, and the country's interest is to preserve its maritime domain.

In mid-2012, during the Aquino III administration, Manila enacted Administrative Order 29, formally designating the EEZ of the Philippines as WPS.[39] The same initiative was formalized with the Philippine Rise (formerly the Benham Rise) in 2017 under the Duterte administration through Executive Order No. 25.[40] Consistent with its 2016 Arbitral Award, which was won through the dispute mechanism of international law, the Philippines is bound by UNCLOS.

Thus far, all national government efforts have harmonized the domestic laws governing maritime interests with international law. The Philippine government is in the process of signing a landmark bill that would unify and reconcile Philippine Treaty Limits with UNCLOS through the Maritime Zones Act.[41] Similarly, the Department of National Defense has taken measures to uphold the country's maritime interests. The agency developed the Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept[42] to bolster national forces for defensive measures against sea disruptions.

To supplement the Philippines' domestic thrusts, it has become a party to international treaties. Ensuring the maintenance of international law bolsters claims and invites international support. Manila was party to the 1982 UNCLOS,[43] affording it access to the dispute mechanism that led to the 2016 Arbitral Award[44] it won against the illegality of China's claims and activities within its EEZs. Prior to UNCLOS, Manila ensured its commitment to earlier maritime treaties such as the 1972 COLREGs;[45] 1973 International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL);[46] 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea;[47] and 1978 International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers.[48]

The Philippines is party to many ASEAN maritime security initiatives. The foremost document outlining maritime security in the context of the Indo-Pacific was the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). UNCLOS is foremost in the AOIP and well-embedded in the Philippine consciousness. Consistent with the UN Charter, UNCLOS, and Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Philippines is party to the finalization and conclusion of the Code of Conduct of Parties in the SCS,[49] which China has long been accused of stalling.[50] Similarly, the Philippines is party to the Convention on Biological Diversity.[51] Expanding its maritime domain is part of its blue economy thrusts, where its population relies on food, energy, and economic security.

Support and positive development from the international community also

[39] LawPhil, "Administrative Order No. 29," https://lawphil.net/executive/ao/ao2012/ao_29_2012.html

[40] Jur, "Executive Order No. 25," https://jur.ph/laws/summary/changing-the-name-of-benham-rise-to-philippine-rise-and-for-other-purposes#

[41] Camille Elemia, "Philippine congress approves bill establishing maritime zones around archipelago," BenarNews, 2024. https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/maritime-zones-02262024143118.html

[42] Rej Cortez Torrecampo, "A Paradigm Shift in the Philippines' Defense Strategy," The Diplomat, 2024. https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/a-paradigm-shift-in-the-philippines-defense-strategy/

[43] United Nations, "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," 1982. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/UNCLOS-TOC.htm

[44] Permanent Court of Arbitration, "The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China," 2016. https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/

[45] International Maritime Organization, "Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea," https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/COLREG.aspx

[46] International Maritime Organization, "International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships," https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Prevention-of-Pollution-from-Ships-(MARPOL).aspx

[47] International Maritime Organization, "International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea," https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS),-1974.aspx

[48] International Maritime Organization, "International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers," https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-on-Standards-of-Training,-Certification-and-Watchkeeping-for-Seafarers-(STCW).aspx

played a role in Manila's strategic calculations for the WPS. For instance, the trilateral summit between the Philippines, US, and Japan on April 11, 2024, shows a converging regional threat perception and mounting interest to deter economic coercion. The US promises to support the development of the Philippines' semiconductor industry, which is consistent with its CHIPS and Science Act. The broad strategic aim is to reduce overreliance on one major supplier, diversify semiconductor production, and jointly protect and develop critical technologies across the three countries.[52] On the other hand, Japan promises a new slate of Official Security Assistance for the Philippines' maritime domain and its ambitious push to finalize a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Manila.[53] The trilateral summit's ambit of concern now includes the East China Sea.

The statement of the G7 Apulia Leaders' Communiqué issued in mid-June 2024[54] is a remarkable development in bringing the maritime dispute into international prominence, citing the G7 economies' strong opposition to any unilateral attempt to shift the status quo in the SCS. More importantly, on July 12, 2016, the Arbitral Award on the SCS was recognized as a milestone for the corpus of international law, reaffirming the legally binding nature of the Award to both the Philippines and China.

3.2 Cybersecurity and Technological Modernization

The Philippine government's prominent actors in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector stem from the DICT and its agencies. All measures taken by the DICT were aimed at reinforcing the Philippines' digital infrastructure, propelling the country's digital transformation, and protecting the digital architecture. DICT has undertaken important digital initiatives in the government, including the creation of Digital Transformation Centers where Filipinos can be upskilled, sustainment of free and accessible Wi-Fi connections in public spaces, Electronic Business Permits and Licensing System (e-PBLS) that enables local governments to issue permits and licenses through digitized processes, and Philippine Business Hub-Central Business Portal (PBH-CBP) to preserve the ease of doing business. Many DICT initiatives cut across all layers of administration and their intervention at every step is vital to the day-to-day operations of the government.

DOST is a government research and development wing. DOST spearheads the testing, research, development, and innovation of certain technologies conceptualized by the national government, including DICT. DOST and its agencies specialize in various research thrusts such as atmospheric, meteorological, and seismological monitoring; advanced sciences; emerging technologies such as AI, cloud, and quantum computing; food and nutrition; industrial technology; the metal industry; and nuclear research.

[49] ASEAN, "Priority Areas of Cooperation," https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/situation-in-the-south-china-sea/priority-areas-of-cooperation/

[50] Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, "PRC still dragging its feet on South China Sea code of conduct," 2023. https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/10/prc-still-dragging-its-feet-on-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/

[51] Convention on Biological Diversity, "Text of the Convention," https://www.cbd.int/convention/text

[52] The White House, "Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States," April 11, 2024. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/11/joint-vision-statement-from-the-leaders-of-japan-the-philippines-and-the-united-states/

[53] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S.-Philippines Summit," April 11, 2024. https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00267.html

[54] The White House, "G7 Apulia Leaders' Communiqué," June 14, 2024. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/06/14/g7-leaders-statement-8/#:~:text=We%20call%20for%20a%20peaceful,quo%20by%20force%20or%20coercion

Other government instruments include the Department of Trade and Industry spearheading initiatives that invite economic activities from the IT and ICT industries and the Department of Education by adopting and upskilling new talent in an increasingly digitized society. Cybersecurity in the Philippines has been rife with delays. The securitization of the issue took hold only once Manila saw security vulnerabilities in the government's ICT infrastructure as more of its operations and the economic activities of the public and private sectors slowly moved towards the digital domain. To supplement its cybersecurity thrust, the past three administrations, Aquino III, Duterte, and Marcos Jr., have taken measures to digitize the country to combat corruption and ease business processes.[55]

Very early during the Aquino III administration, the Philippines passed the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173)[56] to boost investments. Privacy law was largely patterned after best practices were instituted by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation.[57] The implementation of rules and regulations for privacy law was finalized in 2016 under the Duterte administration.[58] Towards the end of the Aquino III administration, the law (RA 10844) mandating the creation of a ministry specific to ICT matters was passed in 2015.[59] It would come to life under the Duterte administration of the DICT.

Under the Duterte and Marcos Jr. administrations, the DICT made urgent strides in Philippine cybersecurity, albeit nascent and organizational. Subsequent plans have been developed to secure the Philippines' digitalization, such as the 2017 National Connectivity and Broadband Development Plan and[60] 2022 E-Government Master Plan.[61] Under the Marcos Jr. administration, DICT began formulating broader and longer-term strategies for the Philippines' digital transformation. The DICT released its NCSP 2023–2028[62] and its Philippine Digital Strategy, the two cruxes of the Philippines' digital transformation, to tackle security and economic growth, respectively.

Although cognizant of development, there is not yet a robust debate on the ground. The DOST has developed a roadmap for AI and ICT.[63]

Much of what the Philippines is doing is patterned after initiatives by ASEAN, including the ASEAN ICT Master Plan 2020[64] and more recently, the ASEAN Digital Master Plan 2025[65] and Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025.[66] These cover broad aspects of sectoral cooperation and the upskilling of ASEAN's ICT industry, such as connectivity and infrastructure, digital transformation, policies, standardizations, and regulations.

The Philippines also welcomes development assistance to improve its ICT industry through capacity building, confidence building, and knowledge and

[55] Julio Amador III and Deryk Baladjay, "When China's Digital Silk Road meets Philippines' digital transformation," Philippine Star, May 8, 2024. https://qa.philstar.com/opinion/2024/05/08/2353499/when-chinas-digital-silk-road-meets-philippines-digital-transformation

[56] National Privacy Commission, "Republic Act 10173: Data Privacy Act of 2012," https://privacy.gov.ph/data-privacy-act/#:~:text=%5BREPUBLIC%20ACT%20NO.,COMMISSION%2C%20AND%20FOR%20OTHER%20PURPOSES

[57] Intersoft Consulting, "General Data Protection Regulation," https://gdpr-info.eu

[58] Official Gazette, "Implementing Rules and Regulations of Republic Act No. 10173, known as the 'Data Privacy Act of 2012,'" 2016. https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/images/uploads/20160825-IRR-RA-10173-data-privacy.pdf

[59] Senate of the Philippines, "Republic Act No. 10844."

[60] DICT, "National Broadband Plan," https://cms-cdn.e.gov.ph/DICT/pdf/2017.08.09-National-Broadband-Plan.pdf

[61] DICT, "E-Government Masterplan 2022," https://dig.watch/resource/philippines-e-government-masterplan-2022

[62] Digital Watch Observatory, "Philippines' National Cybersecurity Plan (NCSP) 2023-2028," https://dig.watch/resource/philippines-national-cybersecurity-plan-ncsp-2023-2028

[63] DOST-PCIEERD, "Artificial Intelligence and Information & Communications Technology: Roadmapping Executive Report," 2021. https://pcieerd.dost.gov.ph/images/pdf/2021/roadmaps/sectoral_roadmaps_division/etdd/Draft-1_AI--ICT-Roadmap-as-24.3.2021.pdf

[64] SEAN, "The ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020," https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/ICT/15b%20--%20AIM%202020_Publication_Final.pdf

technology transfers from partner countries such as the US (through the US Agency for International Development), Japan (JICA), South Korea (Korea International Cooperation Agency), Australia (Asia Foundation), and the European Union.

Similarly, external developments have been beneficial for Manila. The Philippines-US-Japan trilateral summit also expressed the intent to develop an alternative ICT ecosystem for the Philippines through Open Radio Access Network field trials that cost USD 8 million.[67] The three countries are expected to hold separate trilateral summits on Cyber and Digital Dialogue for further cooperation in the digital domain.

3.3 Terrorism and Political Violence

The Philippines has a dedicated line of government agencies that respond directly to terrorism and political violence. Apart from a robust legal community, the government corps of actors includes the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and its chief enforcement agency, the PNP. Both the DILG and PNP are responsible for securing the safety of lives in the domestic context.

Other government agencies responsible for detecting and coordinating with the PNP include the Bureau of Immigration, the BOC, and Anti-Money Laundering Council. The National Security Council, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, and other pertinent government offices mentioned above also comprise the Anti-Terrorism Council. All these agencies have enforcement capabilities primarily operated and spearheaded by the PNP. For instances where additional firepower and human resources are needed, the Philippine Army of the Armed Forces of the Philippines may be involved.The Philippines has a lengthy history, first with political violence caused by the NPA, a communist faction of revolutionaries labeled a terrorist group for its dangerous activities nationwide, and subsequently with terrorist groups after the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). During the Macapagal-Arroyo administration, the Human Security Act of 2007 (RA 9372)[68] was passed to protect the liberty, life, and property of Filipinos and allay the fear of terrorism at the time. It also defined terrorism in the context of fear and pre-existing laws such as articles against mutiny, rebellion, insurrection, coup d'etat, murder, and serious illegal detention in the Revised Penal Code, the Law on Arson (PD 1613), Anti-Hijacking Law (RA 6235), Anti-Piracy and Anti-Highway Robbery Law (PD 532), and Anti-Wire Tapping Law (RA 4200), and provided commensurate penalties for violations thereof.

[65] ASEAN, "ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025," https://asean.org/book/asean-digital-masterplan-2025/

[66] ASEAN, "ASEAN Plan on ASEAN Connectivity," https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/8_compressed.pdf

[67] The White House, "Joint Vision Statement."

[68] Philippine Senate, "Republic Act No. 9372," http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/republic_acts/ra%209372.pdf

Similarly, Manila developed measures to curtail and deter TF. It passed the Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2001 (RA 9160)[69] primarily to deter government corruption, and in 2012, the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act (RA 10168),[70] more specifically against terrorist groups. Under the Duterte administration, the 2020 Anti-Terrorism Act[71] was passed and expanded under the 2007 Human Security Act. This was prompted by the Marawi crisis of 2017 when ISIL-affiliated groups upended the peace of Marawi City in Mindanao.

The Philippines likewise passed legislation expanding its intervention in strategic trade activities to insulate the country from dangerous trade exchanges from various countries. The Strategic Trade Management Act of 2015 (RA 10697),[72] passed in the latter years of the Aquino III administration, sought to ensure that strategic materials coming in, out, and/or passing through the Philippines' borders were tracked and observed. It observes a strict list of items called the National Strategic Goods List, especially those coming from and for (through transshipments) pariah states such as North Korea and Iran.

Manila is party to international conventions that ensure human security including the 1970 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft,[73] 1971 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation,[74] 1973 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons including Diplomatic Agents,[756] 1979 International Convention against the Taking of Hostages,[76] 1980 Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material,[77] 1988 Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation,[78] 1988 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation,[79] 1988 Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Fixed Platforms located on the Continental Shelf,[80] and 1997 International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings. The Philippines adopted all these in conjunction with multilateral interests to preserve human security in the air, land, and sea.

Likewise, the Philippines shares the ASEAN vision for a rule-based community of nations. Manila patterns many of its efforts with the 2009 ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint[81] to harmonize political-security relations with the rest of the region and foster coordination in important issue areas such as the free flow of information and intelligence, strategies for the rule of law, judicial systems, legal infrastructure, good governance, human rights, anti-corruption, democracy, peace, stability, and norm shaping and sharing. The blueprint espouses important initiatives to achieve harmonization among ASEAN Member States, including confidence-building measures, transparency, defense and security cooperation, upholding territorial integrity, avenues for conflict resolution and dispute

[69] AMLC, "Republic Act No. 9160," http://www.amlc.gov.ph/laws/money-laundering/2015-10-16-02-50-56/republic-act-9160

[70] AMLC, "Republic Act No. 10168," http://www.amlc.gov.ph/laws/terrorism-financing/2015-10-16-02-51-58

[71] LawPhil, "Republic Act No. 11479," https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2020/pdf/ra_11479_2020.pdf

[72] LawPhil, "Republic Act No. 10697," https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2015/ra_10697_2015.html

[73] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft," https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv2-english.pdf

[74] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation," https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20974/volume-974-I-14118-english.pdf

[75] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, including Diplomatic Agents," https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_4_1973.pdf

[76] UN Treaty Collection, "International Convention against the Taking of Hostages," https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/english-18-5.pdf

[77] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material," https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv6-english.pdf

[78] UN Treaty Collection, "Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation," https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv7-english.pdf

[79] UN Treaty Collection, "Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation," https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/terrorism/conv8-english.pdf

[80] UN Treaty Collection, "Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Fixed Platforms located on the Continental Shelf," https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv9-english.pdf

settlement, and peacebuilding activities.

Finally, Manila is party to important ASEAN initiatives that complement the political-security blueprint, such as the ASEAN Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime 2016–2025;[82] ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children[83] and subsequent declarations and plans of action;[84] ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism[85] and subsequent declarations and plans of action;[86] and subsequent declarations and work plans.[87]

[81] ASEAN, "ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint," 2009. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APSC_BluePrint.pdf

[82] ASEAN, "ASEAN Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime (2016–2025)," 2017. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Plan-of-Action-in-Combating-TC_Adopted-by-11th-AMMTC-on-20Sept17-1.pdf

[83] ASEAN, "ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children," 2015. https://asean.org/asean-convention-against-trafficking-in-persons-especially-women-and-children/

[84] ASEAN, "Irregular Movement of People, People Smuggling, and Trafficking in Persons," https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/irregular-movement-of-people-people-smuggling-and-trafficking-in-persons/

[85] ASEAN, "ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism," 2007. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ACCT.pdf

[86] ASEAN, "Counter Terrorism," https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/counter-terrorism/

[87] ASEAN, "Illicit Drugs," https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/illicit-drugs/

IV. Conclusion

The Philippines is aware of vulnerabilities arising from its natural position and geopolitical (both economic and security) learning. These vulnerabilities predominantly arise from internal and external security concerns, and the government has set policy measures and strategies to outline its vision on how to best tackle and address these issues. More importantly, the above national security challenges require a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. The ongoing territorial disputes in the WPS-SCS remain a top concern, as they threaten Manila's sovereignty and pose potential economic and military risks. China's exponential presence within the Philippine EEZ has muddled bilateral relations with Beijing. The Philippines is leveraging the presence of its ally (the US) and security partners to ensure robust maritime defense, robust diplomatic relations, and sufficient international support to safeguard its territorial integrity and maritime interests.

Cybersecurity and technological modernization have emerged as other critical areas, with increasing cybersecurity threats targeting government hardware infrastructure, businesses, and critical infrastructure. Manila's rapid digitalization of services and its growing reliance on digital platforms underscore the urgency of enhancing cyber defense. The Philippines continues to suffer from online fraud due in part to digital illiteracy and the rapid growth of fraud hubs within the country. Law enforcement agencies also need to be upskilled to deter illicit activities effectively. The government must invest in advanced cybersecurity technologies, promote public-private partnerships in establishing digital infrastructure, and develop a more skilled digital workforce to ensure the resilience of Manila's budding digitally powered economy.

Finally, terrorism and political violence continue to disrupt the social stability and economic progress of the southern and mid-northern Philippines. The persistence of insurgent groups and continuing radicalization demand a proactive and holistic counter-terrorism strategy. Although the Armed Forces of the Philippines have delegated relatively lower concerns for security, economic growth and stability continue to elude affected communities. To mitigate this, it is imperative for the government to not only strengthen military and law enforcement capabilities but also address the broader causes of extremism through salient socioeconomic development, education, and community engagement.

These national security concerns are foremost in Philippine security policymaking circles. They are tied to many economic and sociocultural challenges and are widely rooted in national consciousness. Therefore, the government's priorities focus on these major concerns.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entity the author represents.

I. South Korea's Pressing Security Threats and Risks

Realism, the dominant international relations theory, posits that the politics among nations revolves around power. International politics is anarchic because there is no authority above the state and all states pursue survival as their primary goal. Hans Morgenthau, a prominent realist scholar, argued that states pursue their own national interests, which are defined in terms of power. According to Kenneth Waltz, another realist theorist, states act in response to and through methods that attempt to balance the power distribution among them.

Another realist approach, known as the "balance of threat" theory or "defensive realism," suggests that the balance of power is insufficient to explain state behavior, which is led by threat perceptions derived from this balance of power. In other words, even a strong state may not be perceived as a threat by its neighbors, depending on how unthreatening it seems. According to Stephen Walt, a theorist of the balance of threat, perceived threats determine states' behaviors, with opponents' power being only one determinant in their decisions. The threat level is also determined by aggregate national power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and intentions. [1]

Determining the intent behind another country's external behavior is difficult because such assessments are based upon subjective judgment. Therefore, the offensive realist theory argues that threat perceptions should not be viewed as the primary driver of state behavior. In other words, as we cannot know another country's inner workings with certainty, we can only act in a way that responds to the apparent magnitude of its power which is arguably how states typically behave.

In addition, a range of other factors influences threat perceptions, including cultural and non-material factors, such as ideology and identity. A country's identity influences its definition of what constitutes vital national interests, while similarities or differences in identity with other countries can facilitate or hinder the communication and interactions with them.

To identify the greatest national security threats or risks faced by South Korea, it would be useful to first determine the components of South Korea's

[1] Stephen M. Walt, The Origins of Alliances (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

identity and then identify what could seriously undermine that identity. From this perspective, it would then be possible to identify threats or risks based on South Korea's three identities, as listed below.

First, South Korea is a divided country that has been at odds with the communist regime of North Korea for nearly 80 years, which threatens its security. Second, as a country with liberal democracy as the main principle of its internal political order, it must ensure that the international environment favors the maintenance of this principle. Therefore, maintaining a liberal international order is vital to South Korea. The weakening of that order and the resulting instability pose a risk and forces actively seeking to change that order are a threat, with China currently being the leading status quo changer. Third, as South Korea is a trading nation that relies on trade for economic survival, it needs a free international environment favorable for trade, and anything that hinders it is a security risk.

Recent South Korean public opinion polls have identified four main security threats or risks. As per Figure 1, according to a poll conducted in August 2024 by the East Asia Institute (EAI), South Korea's leading private international affairs think-tank, the top threats facing South Korea are the North Korean nuclear and missile threat (51.1%), the US–China strategic competition and conflict (42.5%), the spread of protectionism and high-tech competition (39.7%), and climate change and environmental issues (51.2%). [2]

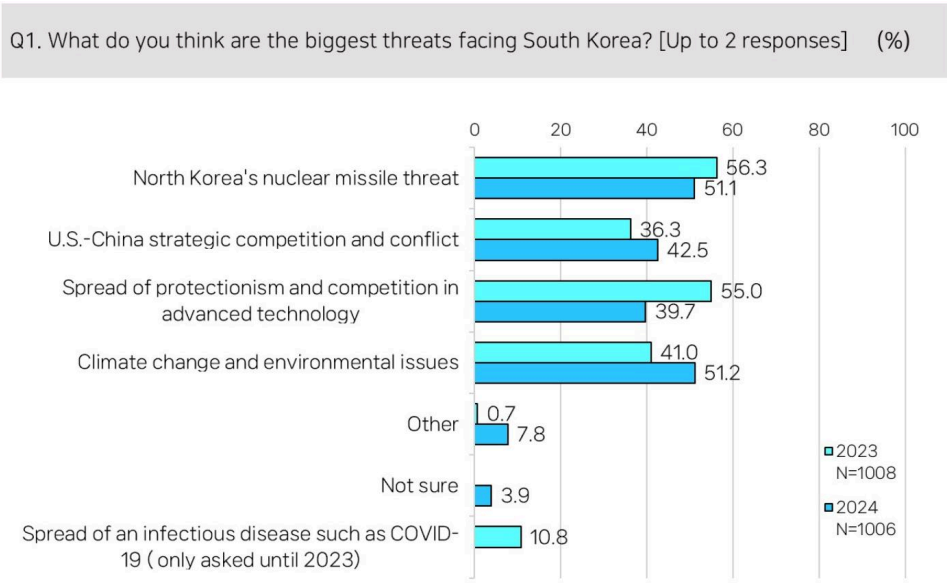


Figure 1. Threats to South Korea. Taken from: East Asia Institute.

[2] EAI, "2024 EAI Public Opinion Poll on International Affairs: Overall Perception, United States, China, North Korea," October 14, 2024. https://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/pub/view.asp?intSeq=22782&board=eng_issuebriefing&keyword_option=&keyword=&more=

The most significant security threat or risk is the military threat from North Korea. It attacked South Korea in 1950, triggering a war and, even after the 1953 armistice, continued to pose a military threat throughout the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea has developed nuclear weapons in earnest, with dozens of nuclear warheads and a variety of ballistic missiles to deliver them. North Korean authorities have admitted to the possible use of nuclear weapons and have identified North and South Korea as two separate and hostile states. Therefore, one of South Korea's main security challenges involves responding to the threat from a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Many different opinions exist within South Korean society regarding the responses to North Korean nuclear threats. At the risk of overgeneralization, progressives favor dialog and compromise, while conservatives favor a harder line; as South Korean politics have become increasingly polarized, North Korean policy has become an important dividing line between progressives and conservatives. As the policy toward North Korea has evolved into an increasingly important domestic political issue, it has also become significantly inflexible. Additionally, it is difficult to expect continuity in North Korean policy, as the South Korean presidential elections every five years have tended to change the government's policy toward North Korea.

Despite these partisan differences between conservative and progressive views on North Korea policy, little variance exists in the perception of North Korea's nuclear programs as a significant threat to South Korea. Whereas South Korea has some pro-North Korean elements that may not view North Korea's nuclear program as a threat, it would be a stretch for conservatives to posit that those who advocate dialog and compromise with North Korea are pro-North. Dialog and compromise are ways to address the existing North Korean nuclear threats but are meaningless if the North Korean nuclear threat is not deterred. However, without dialog and compromise, the goal of denuclearizing North Korea will be difficult to achieve.

Identifying the secondary and tertiary threats or risks to the North Korean nuclear threat is difficult as well. Other threats or risks may have not been recognized and addressed, perhaps because South Korea's security has focused on the single threat posed by North Korea for so long. It is thus unclear whether anything else outside the North Korean threat is a certain threat or risk.

However, if we use South Korea's national identity as a benchmark, the secondary threat or risk is the rise of China and the resulting destabilization of the international order in the region. On the one hand, if viewed as a threat, this issue emphasizes the need for vigilance in relation to China's foreign behavior and intentions. On the other hand, if the US–China rivalry

and regional instability that has emerged due to China's rise are emphasized, the situation can be perceived as a risk rather than a threat. In other words, in this case, the risk is not posed by China's actions and intentions per se but by the structure of the US–China rivalry.

South Korea's security perception is a combination of the above issues. Since China's "THAAD (terminal high-altitude area defense) retaliation" in 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic, South Koreans have increasingly perceived China as a threat, with increasingly negative perceptions. Moreover, South Korea holds the widely accepted view that a US–China hegemonic rivalry exists, contesting China's rise and the US efforts to contain it. On this issue, South Korean public opinion leans heavily toward the United States, which South Koreans perceive as the friendliest country.

However, few believe that China's rising power will be aimed at South Korea. In terms of economic relations, China's developing manufacturing industry, increasing labor wages, and Communist Party's tightening control over the market have made investing in China and entering the Chinese market much less attractive. Nevertheless, South Korea perceives that it is still necessary to maintain economic relations with China. The increase in the intermediate goods imports from China has also contributed to this perception. In the diplomatic sphere, expectations exist that China can exert political leverage over North Korea, either to denuclearize the country or curb North Korea's provocative behavior.

The South Korean government's policies toward China reflect this perception as well as the realistic need for relationships with China. Hence, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy can be used as a case study. Following the announcement of the United States and other major countries' Indo-Pacific strategies or policy initiatives since 2017, there were calls both within and outside the South Korean government to develop an Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the Moon Jae In government was reluctant to cooperate with United States' Indo-Pacific strategy because of concerns that it would provoke China. Subsequently, South Korea responded by cooperating with the United States under the New Southern Policy, promoted since the beginning of the Moon administration. However, this policy emphasized economic and sociocultural cooperation with India and the ASEAN countries and minimized security-related activities.

The Yoon Suk Yeol government came to power in 2022 and released its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in December 2022 to align itself with the United States much more aggressively than its predecessor. However, the report focused on maintaining stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific region. While this indirectly implied that South Korea opposed China's attempts to change the regional status quo, it did not publicly identify China as a threat to South

Korean security, nor did it state that South Korea would strategically counter China. Rather, the report left room for maintaining and enhancing the relations with China by emphasizing inclusiveness in the Indo-Pacific as one of the three principles of cooperation, along with trust and reciprocity. [3]

Economic security was the third most important security risk factor, although it is a relatively new concept. Until recently, the economy was perceived as separate from security. However, the realization that this separation can no longer be taken for granted and may not even be possible in the future has shifted the perceptions of the economy as a security issue.

As South Korea has limited natural resources and depends on trade, it has built its economic wealth by importing almost all raw materials and energy resources, processing them into value-added products, and exporting them. This implies that South Korea depends not only on international activities for economic survival but also on its economy, which is vulnerable to fluctuations in the international order.[4]

This order has recently entered a volatile transition period, with many factors at play. Among them, the intensified US–China rivalry is an important driver of change. The trade war between the two countries began with the imposition of tariffs and is an expression of protectionism that undermines the free trade norms and principles that are at the foundation of South Korea's economic prosperity. Additionally, the United States has pursued strict public export controls, technology leakage regulations in high-tech sectors, and subsidies that discriminate against products using Chinese materials.

As these policies have created unprecedented challenges for South Korea's manufacturing industry, it developed closer ties with China. For example, the semiconductor and automobile industries—among many others—are critical to the South Korean economy. Various geopolitical variables have made it difficult to maintain stability in export markets and supply chains, leading to losses in foreign investments. In the latter case, South Korean conglomerates have built and operated large-scale semiconductor factories in China and an automobile factory in Russia. However, the United States' policies of curbing the Chinese semiconductor industry and imposing sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine have quickly turned ambitious investments in China and Russia into mistakes.

Although these threats are dominant, other important ones exist as well. For example, the rapidly changing weather patterns due to climate change, population decline due to plummeting birth rates, and aging populations are not traditional security threats but pose serious challenges to community

[3] The Government of the Republic of Korea, "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region," December 28, 2022.

[4] Lowy Institute, "Asia Power Index." https://power.lowyinstitute.org/countries/south-korea/#section-top

survival. Of these, climate change is perceived as nearly on par with the North Korean nuclear threat in EAI's 2024 poll. While the extremely high temperatures in the summer of 2024 may have had a short-term impact on these results, a long-term trend also exists in the perception of this threat, with 41% of respondents citing climate change as a threat in 2023. Notably, the perception of climate change threats was particularly high among young people.

Political changes in major countries are also important risk factors. The United States 2024 presidential election is of particular concern. Although the race between Democratic candidate Harris and Republican candidate Trump seemed close, it ended with Trump's landslide victory. Trump promised to put "America first," signaling another foreign policy shift. We have already experienced a Trump presidency, but his return to power could create unprecedented changes. For example, a transactional approach can weaken alliances, as Trump has previously demonstrated. During his previous term, key advisors prevented him from implementing his policies. However, in his second administration, Trump seems decided to exclude those who oppose his wishes, appointing people who agree with his key positions.

The Biden administration sought to counter the rise of China by forging new partnerships with its allies and other security partners. This starkly contrasts with the United States' past attempts to lead the world order independently. Especially in Asia, the Biden administration has built a network of cooperative alliances in the newly renamed Indo-Pacific region. While the "hub-and-spokes" system established during the Cold War consisted of multiple bilateral relationships between the United States and other countries in the region, the new system promoted by the United States attempted to create a lattice-like network by activating the connectivity of the United States and its allies as well as these allies' connectivity with each other.

As part of this attempt, the trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan was also strengthened. In August 2023, a ROK–US–Japan Summit was held at Camp David, US president's vacation home. This summit, which ultimately strengthened trilateral cooperation, was the result of direct and indirect pressure from the Biden administration. Therefore, the United States' future interests and efforts will affect trilateral cooperation.

As the Trump administration hoped for cooperation between Korea, Japan, and the United States, this would likely continue, as expressed by Robert O'Brian, Trump's former National Security Advisor. However, if Trump will criticize allies for not paying enough for their security and demand a sharp increase in defense spending and defense burden sharing, America's

relationships with South Korea and Japan could quickly become uncomfortable. In this case, South Korea and Japan could theoretically become closer as the trust in the United States' security provisions erodes.

However, if Trump's alliance policies negatively affect the countries' relations with key allies, such as South Korea and Japan, it is not easy to envision how the momentum of the Korea–US–Japan cooperation will evolve.

In any case, United States' changing political landscape remains fundamentally problematic. First, the United States has become significantly more politically polarized, reducing its policy stability. Specifically, when the party in power changes, policies change dramatically. While it is natural for a change in administration to create policy changes, the amplitude of these changes has become excessive compared to the past. If extreme policies are pursued without reasonable convergence, the likelihood of policy failure increases, making it difficult to ensure continuity.

Second, populism has also become an issue in American politics. In particular, the American middle class's decline due to globalization has provided fertile ground for populism. The benefits of globalization have largely accrued to the educated elite, while the low-skilled working class has been victimized. Their grievances led to a rising nationalism and isolationism, and Trump has been gaining political support by appealing to these sentiments through his "America First" platform. Even after Trump's second term, the fertile ground for populism and the politicians who capitalize on it will endure, with profound implications for US foreign relations.

If the United States continues to neglect its role in maintaining and improving the liberal world order, the world will become like a garden without a gardener—quickly devolving into a jungle. A weakening of the liberal order significantly challenges the survival and prosperity of middle powers such as South Korea, as they are the primary beneficiaries of this order.

II. Analysis of the Top Three Security Issues

2.1 North Korea's Nuclear Threat

The most direct and current security threat facing South Korea is undoubtedly the military threat from North Korea, specifically the threat of a nuclear attack. North Korea has been working to develop nuclear weapons and is believed to have dozens of nuclear warheads at present and the means to deliver them through various missile developments.

North Korea's history of nuclear development dates to the 1950s but is believed to have begun in earnest in the wake of the breakdown of its alliances with former Communist countries when the Cold War ended. As North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006 and the sixth in 2017, its ability to produce nuclear weapons is generally unquestioned. However, as it has recently developed a new modular nuclear warhead, the possibility of a seventh nuclear test continues to increase.

Although North Korea initially relied on plutonium extractions through nuclear fuel reprocessing to build its nuclear arsenal, it appears to have progressed to the production of highly enriched uranium. Specifically, it operates a large-scale uranium enrichment facility in what is believed to be the Kangseon region, near Pyongyang, with recently released photos of leader Kim Jong Un visiting the facility and providing guidance. Currently, North Korea is believed to have at least two dozen nuclear weapons and the continued operation of its uranium enrichment facilities increases its nuclear arsenal.

North Korea is also committed to developing delivery systems capable of carrying nuclear warheads, with a focus on missile development. It has already developed short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles and is working on long-range, intercontinental ballistic missiles. North Korea has not yet acquired the technology for re-entering the atmosphere. However, given its alarming progress in missile technology, it may only be a matter of time before it does. North Korea has also developed a variety of other nuclear delivery systems, including Iskandar-type and other cruise missiles and multiple massive rocket launchers with guidance capabilities. It has also attempted to develop submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). To do so, it has been developing new, larger submarines than its existing Romeo-class, as well as cold-launch technology to launch missiles underwater.

North Korea's ultra-large multiple rocket launchers (MRLs) and short- and intermediate-range missiles can already reach the entire Korean Peninsula and are believed to have a range as far away as the US territory of Guam. As such, they could harm not only South Korean and the US forces in Korea but also the US forces in Japan or Guam, which could be deployed to South Korea. While North Korea has not yet successfully developed and fielded SLBMs or intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), it continues to work on them. If successful, these efforts would enable North Korea to launch a surprise nuclear strike against the United States.

The recent strengthening of the relations and cooperation between North Korea and Russia is noteworthy. When Russia's protracted war with Ukraine decimated its supply of artillery shells, it turned to North Korea. In 2023, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visited Russia's Far East and held a summit with Russian President Putin; in 2024, Putin visited Pyongyang and co-signed a mutual defense treaty between the two countries. Russia reportedly provides food and other aid to North Korea in exchange for munition support. However, North Korea is not content to stop there and desires Russian technology to develop weaponry. It is unclear whether such transfers have actually occurred, and it is possible that Russia is reluctant to transfer advanced technologies to North Korea. However, if North Korea's relationship with Russia continues to develop and advanced weapons technology transfers occur, this could mark a major step forward in the development of North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

While this development does not represent a direct military threat to South Korea, it represents a threat to the United States and could test the United States' commitment to defending South Korea as its ally. Further, the latter relies on the United States as an extended deterrent to North Korea's nuclear threat. In other words, North Korea has been deterred from launching a nuclear attack on South Korea because of the certainty that the United States would retaliate with a nuclear strike on North Korea.

If Pyongyang were to acquire the capability to strike the US mainland with a nuclear weapon, this would undermine the credibility of United States' extended deterrence. This is a serious concern for South Korea. That is, even if North Korea attacks South Korea, the United States may not launch a retaliatory strike against North Korea for fear of its mainland being hit by a North Korean nuclear strike. This concern has led some in South Korea to question the reliability of United States' extended deterrence; it has also caused some to argue that South Korea should develop its nuclear arsenal rather than rely on the US nuclear umbrella.

The nuclear threat perceived by South Korea has increased as North Korea has not only advanced its nuclear weapons capabilities but also issued doctrines

on nuclear use. In September 2022, the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK adopted the decree "On the State Policy on the Nuclear Forces." This 11-article decree specifies the purpose of nuclear weapons, composition of the nuclear force, command and control options, conditions for using nuclear weapons, negative security assurances, and non-proliferation obligations. Article 6 states that the DPRK may preemptively use nuclear weapons under the following circumstances:

> *"In case an attack by nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction was launched or drew near is judged.*
>
> *In case a nuclear or non-nuclear attack by hostile forces on the state leadership and the command organization of the state's nuclear forces was launched or drew near is judged.*
>
> *In case a fatal military attack against important strategic objects of the state was launched or drew near is judged.*
>
> *In case the need for operation for preventing the expansion and protraction of a war and taking the initiative in the war in contingency is inevitably raised.*
>
> *In other case an inevitable situation in which it is compelled to correspond with catastrophic crisis to the existence of the state and safety of the people by only nuclear weapons is created."*[5]

North Korea has clarified that it can respond to any conventional attack using nuclear weapons, as such weapons can be used when attacks are imminent. North Korea has demonstrated a highly aggressive nuclear doctrine that has left the door open to the use of nuclear weapons since the earliest stages of conflict. It has also ensured security by adopting an aggressive nuclear posture.

In March 2024, North Korea abandoned its previous nationalist unification line and discourse by defining North and South Korea as hostile states. It also reorganized the organizations and institutions of inter-Korean affairs, such as the National Committee for Peace and Reunification. As such, it no longer perceives South Korea as a body to be unified and will address it as any other country in the future.

As North Korea no longer perceives South Korea as a target for reunification, a policy change could be considered a positive development if it were willing to pursue a peaceful coexistence with other countries. However, North Korea still perceives South Korea as hostile.

[5] KCNA Watch, "Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated," September 9, 2022. https://kcnawatch.xyz/newstream/1662687258-950776986/law-on-dprks-policy-on-nuclear-forces-promulgated/

Therefore, North Korea's new policy toward South Korea does not express its intent to promote the mutual coexistence and dialog with South Korea; rather, the emphasis is on defining South Korea as an adversary that intensifies confrontation. This shift in policy and discourse indicates that, as its power gap with South Korea has widened, North Korea has become defensive and now declares internally and externally a clear break from South Korea. However, the fact that North Korea intensified its hostile policies toward South Korea signifies that the North Korean threat has grown.

Naturally, South Korea's perception of North Korea is neither static nor monolithic. While the consensus is that the threat from North Korea has escalated, the conservatives and progressives hold different views on the matter. Consequently, the policy toward North Korea may change when the administration changes between conservative and progressive parties. Conservatives point to North Korea's continued nuclear development and aggressive policies toward South Korea as the causes of this threat. By contrast, the progressive forces assume that South Korea's hardline policy toward North Korea with hostile intent has led to North Korea's similar response to South Korea.

For example, Yoon government's first Defense White Paper, published in February 2023, clearly identified North Korea as an enemy:

> *"The Charter of the Workers' Party was amended in 2021 to explicitly state the goal of unifying the entire Korean Peninsula under communist rule. During the Plenary Session of the Central Committee, held in December 2022, the North Korean leadership declared the Republic of Korea as an 'unquestionable enemy.' North Korea's refusal to abandon its nuclear program and relentless military threats make both its regime and military enemies of the Republic of Korea."*[6]

The resurgence after six years of the argument that North Korea is the primary adversary reflects a change in the policy toward North Korea compared to the previous Moon government. The Defense White Paper published under this government discarded the idea of North Korea as an enemy.[7] Former President Moon recently criticized the Yoon government in a keynote speech at the Jeonam Peace Conference, held to mark the sixth anniversary of the September 19 Pyongyang Joint Declaration, stating that the Yoon government had undermined the previous government's efforts to build trust and dialog with North Korea by demonstrating its intention to absorb North Korea for reunification.[8]

[6] Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, "2022 Defense White Paper," February 2023, p. 39. https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblictn/PBLICTNEBOOK_202307280406019810.pdf

[7] Kwon Hyuk-chul, "S. Korea's First Defense White Paper under Yoon Defines N. Korea as 'Enemy'," Hankyoreh, February 17, 2023. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1080174.html

[8] SBS News, "Moon Jae-in Criticizes Government's North Korea Policy…'Past Governments' Efforts Are Wasted,"' September 20, 2024. https://news.sbs.co.kr/news/endPage.do?news_id=N1007806318#close&plink=COPYPASTE&cooper=SBSNEWSEND

2.2 China's Rise and Regional Instability

The second most important security issue faced by South Korea involves China's rise and the resulting destabilization of the regional order from South Korea's security perspective, China's ascent is both a threat and a risk but is not easy to categorize it as either. Perceptions are mixed, China being perceived as either a threat, risk, or opportunity.

China provided an economic opportunity for South Korea after the Cold War ended. Specifically, it intervened militarily during the Korean War in 1950 and fought directly against the South Korean armed forces. China's intervention shattered any dream of reunification. Throughout the Cold War, Communist China was South Korea's adversary. As the 1970s saw a détente between the United States and China in international affairs, South Korea sought to improve its relations with China as North Korea's communist ally, which was a diplomatic victory over North Korea. In the early 1990s, when the Cold War system was dismantled, South Korea actively pursued Nordpolitik and successfully established diplomatic relations with China in 1992. China, which has been undergoing reforms since 1979, including introducing a market economy, was eager to learn about the secrets of South Korea's economic growth and expand its economic exchanges. Many South Korean companies have entered China's vast market, invested in China, and sold their products in the global market. South Korea benefited economically as China became the "factory of the world" and experienced rapid economic growth.

South Korea's relationship with China is also important in terms of its policy toward North Korea. After the first North Korean nuclear crisis, when North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in March 1993, China played an important role in the international efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear program because of the close and complex political and economic ties between them. Since the six-party talks began in 2003 to address the North Korean nuclear issue, China has made its presence felt in diplomatic efforts to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue by convening meetings and acting as a mediator.

South Korea's emphasis on cooperation with China, both in terms of economic ties and North Korean policy, is evidenced by President Park Geun-hye attendance at China's Victory Day military parade in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on September 3, 2015. Park attended the ceremony alongside President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, which came as a shock to the West, including the United States. However, Park mentioned that China had requested her attendance months before the event and that the South Korean government had to carefully consider whether to attend to continue cooperation with China on economic and nuclear

issues, as "At that time, the relationship between China and North Korea was gradually growing distant and cracks were appearing," she said, emphasizing that "attending the festival was part of the process of expanding the space for cooperation with China" and that she "still does not regret that decision."[9]

Although the South Korea–China relations reached an apex when Park attended the Tiananmen Square ceremony, they rapidly deteriorated. South Korea was disappointed that China did not pressure North Korea to denuclearize. China took issue with the United States deployment of its THAAD system in South Korea, criticizing Seoul's approval of the THAAD deployment. Deployment was meant to counter North Korea's growing missile threat. However, China argued that the US military's THAAD radar could seriously harm its security because it could place China in its detection range. In June 2016, China performed an informal economic retaliation against South Korea. Chinese travelers stopped visiting South Korea, exchange programs were suspended, and various informal restrictions on South Korean companies in China were tightened, sometimes leading to their withdrawal. In South Korea, China's actions became known as the "THAAD retaliation."

This retaliation significantly changed South Korea's perceptions of China. As Figure 2 shows, a Pew Research Center poll indicated that South Koreans had a relatively positive attitude toward China in 2015, with only 37% having a negative view. However, since 2017, the South Korean attitude toward China has become sharply negative, with negative perceptions increasing by 61%.[10] It is easy to assume that China's THAAD retaliation, which began in 2016, was the most decisive trigger for this change. The negative views of China increased again in 2020 and 2021 in the aftermath of COVID-19 to 75% and 77%, respectively, before dropping slightly to 71% according to a spring 2024 survey.[11]

*% who have an **unfavorable** view of China*

Most unfavorable Least unfavorable

	'02	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	Spring '20	Summer '20	'19-'20 change
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Australia	-	-	-	-	40	-	-	-	-	35	-	33	39	**32**	47	57	-	81	▲**24**
UK	-	16	**14**	27	36	29	35	26	35	31	38	37	44	37	35	55	-	74	▲**19**
Sweden	-	-	-	**40**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	59	49	52	70	-	85	▲**15**
Netherlands	-	**34**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	43	42	45	58	-	73	▲**15**
Germany	-	37	**33**	54	68	63	61	59	67	64	64	60	60	53	54	56	-	71	▲**15**
U.S.	-	35	**29**	39	42	38	36	36	40	52	55	54	55	47	47	60	66	73	▲**13**
South Korea	**31**	-	-	42	49	54	56	-	-	50	42	37	-	61	60	63	-	75	▲**12**
Spain	-	**21**	38	43	56	41	38	39	46	47	55	50	56	43	48	53	-	63	▲**10**
France	-	42	**41**	51	**72**	60	59	49	60	58	53	49	61	52	54	62	-	70	▲**8**
Canada	-	**27**	-	37	-	36	-	-	-	45	-	48	40	40	45	67	-	73	▲**6**
Italy	-	-	-	61	-	-	-	-	64	62	**70**	**57**	61	59	60	**57**	-	62	+5
Japan	**42**	-	71	67	84	69	69	61	84	**93**	91	89	86	83	78	85	-	86	+1
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	71	-
Denmark	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	75	-

Note: Statistically significant differences shown in **bold**. In Italy, 2020 survey was conducted by telephone; prior surveys were conducted face-to-face.
Source: Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey. Q8b.
"Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries"

Figure 2. Increasingly negative evaluations of China. Taken from: The Pew Research Center.

[9] Yoo Seong-un, "Park, Xi Jinping, 'Let's Talk Separately'... Prevented the Repatriation of North Korean Defectors [Park Geun-hye's Memoir])," JoongAng Ilbo, November 29, 2023. https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25210934

[10] Pew Research Center, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries Majorities Say China Has Handled COVID-19 Outbreak Poorly," The Pew Research Center, October 6, 2020. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/

[11] Pew Research Center, "Most People in 35 Countries Say China Has a Large Impact on Their National Economy," The Pew Research Center, July 9, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/07/09/most-people-in-35-countries-say-china-has-a-large-impact-on-their-national-economy/

This increasingly negative domestic public opinion was bound to affect South Korean government's policy toward China.[12] However, the content of these negative perceptions is important. There is no clear answer as to whether China is perceived as a direct threat to South Korea's national security.

Some South Korean security experts have argued that China's military buildup directly threatens South Korea's security. According to the Ministry of National Defense's 2020 report, titled "Activities of Major Foreign Military Vessels Near the Korean Peninsula in Recent Five Years," as of August 2020, Chinese warships have crossed the provisional equidistance line of South Korea's exclusive economic zone 910 times since 2016.[13] Further, Chinese and Russian naval vessels have been active in the East Sea and the two countries have also conducted joint naval exercises in the Sea of Okhotsk.

Critics interpret China's continuation of these illegal and threatening military provocations as being aimed at neutralizing the US–ROK alliance and the US Forces Korea (USFK), which are at the heart of China's last line of maritime defense. By doing so, China can effectively defend its littoral zones within the first island chain. As Beijing has calculated its defense to include countering US forces approaching its seas, the Chinese preparation for this contingency also increases China's threat to South Korea.[14]

However, other South Korean security experts do not share this threat perception. Advocates of the "balanced diplomacy" argue that China's military buildup is aimed at the United States, not South Korea and that South Korea should not rush to side with the United States regarding the US–China rivalry. Echoing these arguments, the opposition's political leader, Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party of Korea, sparked a political controversy on March 22, 2024, when he said, "Why do we pester China? Why don't we just say 'sheshe' to China and 'sheshe' to Taiwan?" He also said, "Why do we care about what happens to the Taiwan Strait or what happens to China and Taiwan's domestic affairs?" and "Should not we just live our lives?"[15] These comments do not suggest the perception of China as a threat but imply the need to improve ties with China. Some experts believe that, although China's economy is slowing down, it will continue to roll over in the long term. They also argue that China has expanded its presence and influence in the global south and that South Korea should not downplay its cooperation with China.

The Yoon Suk Yeol government's current policies indicate its heightened wariness regarding China. Since the beginning of his term, President Yoon has focused his diplomacy efforts on strengthening the alliance with the United States and improving the relations with Japan, a key US ally. In December 2022, the Yoon government released South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, followed by an implementation plan the following year.[16]

[12] Gi-Wook Shin, Haley Gordon, & Hannah June Kim, "South Koreans Are Rethinking What China Means to Their Nation," The Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, February 8, 2022. https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/south-koreans-are-rethinking-what-china-means-their-nation#_ftnref2

[13] Kim Gwi-geun, "Chinese Warships Have Increased Their Activity in Waters Near the Korean Peninsula," Yonhap News, October 16, 2020. https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20201016074700504. The MND report cited in this news article was not released to the public.

[14] Jo Moon-jung, "China Designates the West Sea as 'Inland Sea' to Nullify Korea's Territorial Sovereignty...Threat to China's Dream Becomes a Reality," New Daily, April 20, 2024. https://www.newdaily.co.kr/site/data/html/2024/04/20/2024042000008.html

[15] Kim Jin-myeong, "Lee Jae-myung Visits Dangjin: 'Why Are You Harping on China ... Just Say Sheshe,'" Chosun Ilbo, March 23, 2024. https://www.chosun.com/politics/politics_general/2024/03/22/RDYKOEY2XJBDZIDCOFO4EDZIVI/

[16] The Government of the Republic of Korea, "Strategy"; The Government of the Republic of Korea, "The Action Plan for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific," December 2023. https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_26382/contents.do

The publication of this strategy could be interpreted as a sign that South Korea will join efforts with the United States to contain China's aggressive foreign policy.

However, the South Korean government has denied that the Indo-Pacific Strategy intends to contain China, as no reports have asserted as much. Rather, South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy is based on three principles, one of which is inclusiveness; hence, the South Korean government views China as an object of vigilance and inclusion.

As Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul recently referred to a "managed diplomacy" strategy toward China, South Korea's focus is on managing the relations between the two countries while recognizing the inherent risks. He said, "In relations with countries with different ideologies and systems, managed diplomacy is equally important to prevent possible crises in advance and to bring about practical cooperation in areas where it is possible," and also noted that "Managing our relations with China, in particular, is critical to our security and continued prosperity."[17]

On the one hand, given South Korea's geographical proximity and economic interdependence with China, an all-out confrontation with Beijing would significantly affect South Korean interests. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that China will not take another unilateral offensive step such as the 2016 "THAAD retaliation;" as such, South Korea cannot afford to let down its guard against the Chinese risk. These circumstances indicate a lack of trust toward China, which is linked to the anti-China sentiments in the South Korean public opinion. As a Stanford University study noted, South Korea's "anti-China sentiment can be seen as a criticism of China's cultural imperialism and illiberalism" and not as an immediate threat from China.[18]

These three types of perceptions regarding China are rather mixed. Sohn Yul—President of the East Asia Institute—considering the results of an August 2024 poll on South Koreans' security perceptions, stated that, "In general, South Koreans are in favor of standing with the United States, but they are quite reserved when it comes to issues involving China. In the fields of economics and science/technology, there is a strong fear that investment in China will shrink." Except for some experts, most South Koreans do not believe they face a direct military threat from China. Some in favor of "decoupling" from China view China as a "security competitor," similar to Washington and Tokyo, or in extreme cases, are driven by an anti-China sentiment. However, public opinion differs. Few South Koreans perceive a direct clash between South Korea and China in terms of security interests. They also want to keep South Korean–US–Japanese cooperation from influencing the economic relations with China.[19]

[17] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry's Policy Advisory Council to Hold the 2024 Plenary Meeting," August 26, 2024. www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4080/view.do?seq=375318

[18] Shin et al., "South Koreans are Rethinking."

[19] Park Hyun-joo & Jeong Yeong-gyo, "'Korea, Do Not Confine Yourself to the US-China Competition Frame' Sohn Yul's Suggestion [Korea's Security, Ask the People]," JoongAng Ilbo, October 9, 2024. https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25283026

2.3 Economic Security

The third issue is economic security. If the economic dependence between countries is used to pressure one country to achieve its political objectives or if a supply chain disruption causes problems in procurement, production, and transportation, a country's economy can be significantly affected. The same applies to protectionism by major countries for domestic, political, and diplomatic purposes. These issues surpass economic gain or loss, becoming a matter of economic survival and, therefore, are recognized as security risks.

South Korea is a trading country, that is, it relies on trade to maintain its economic survival and prosperity. Trade accounts for more than 70% of South Korea's GDP: its exports and imports reached 72.9% in 2020, 85.3% in 2021, and 102% in 2022.[20] Given this high dependence on trade, it is crucial for South Korea's economic survival that the domestic and international environments in which exports and imports occur remain stable.

Only recently has the economy been recognized as an object of security. As the economy is an important area of governance and the basic foundation of national power, it closely related to foreign affairs and security. Since the post-Cold War era, the economy has not been a major security concern; instead, the neoliberal consensus that economics should be separated from politics has been widely formed and internationally operationalized.

The principle of separation between politics and economics has provided a favorable environment for South Korea's stable economic growth in the post-Cold War globalization era. The principle that political relations between countries should not affect economic relations is the norm for both international relations and the global economy. Globalization, which began in earnest at the end of the Cold War with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, expanded the scope of South Korea's economic activities. The principle of separation was maintained in the expanding liberal world order, as an important condition for the South Korean economy's expansion.

However, with the "return of geopolitics,"[21] it has become difficult to uphold this principle. The "weaponization of interdependence" refers to a new phenomenon, in which economic interdependence becomes a means of pressuring the other party.[22] China's THAAD retaliation is a prime example of the weaponization of interdependence that South Korea experienced, as well as Japan's 2019 export restrictions on materials for semiconductor manufacturing.

This pattern of economic retaliation is likely to continue in the future. China has continued to use economic pressure as a key tool in its foreign policy,

[20] National Index System, "Import/Export Ratio (% of GDP)," last updated June 27, 2024 https://www.index.go.kr/unity/potal/indicator/IndexInfo.do?cdNo=2&clasCd=2&idxCd=4207&upCd=1 (in Korean)

[21] Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," Foreign Affairs, May/June 2014. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-04-17/return-geopolitics

[22] Henry Farrell & Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," International Security 44(1) (2019). https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351

even after its THAAD retaliation against South Korea. For example, when the Australian government called on China to investigate the source of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, Beijing responded by suspending the imports of Australian wine and coal, among other products. The United States has also begun to strictly enforce export control measures to prevent the flow of high technology to China. Although the World Trade Organization has a review system for resolving trade disputes between countries, this system no longer functions. The era of economic liberalism is over and the one of economic security has started.

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 led to international economic sanctions. Foreign companies investing in or conducting business in Russia have suffered significant losses. Additionally, instability in the Middle East has disrupted maritime transportation through the Suez Canal and Strait of Hormuz, causing logistics costs to skyrocket. Geopolitical changes have directly affected the economic activities of both countries and companies. Widespread concern also exists regarding military conflict in the Taiwan Strait due to China's attempt to unify by force. Such events are expected to have negative economic consequences, with economic security becoming increasingly significant.

Economic security has become prominent in view of the growing rivalry between the United States and China. The United States sees China's rise as a challenge to its hegemony. If China becomes a regional hegemonic power in Asia, which has emerged as the center of the global economy, it could challenge the United States' status as a global superpower. This perceived threat and concern about a rising China have been voiced in US security circles since the 2010s, but the US business community has prioritized maintaining the relations with China because of its interest in entering the Chinese market. Consequently, uneasy relationships emerged between the United States and China for some time, based on close economic ties but growing political distrust.

However, the US business community has become increasingly wary of China. Microsoft's withdrawal from the Chinese market and China's alleged currency manipulation, patent infringement, and technology theft from US companies that invested in China all changed the perceptions of the US business community. As such, the voices advocating for maintaining friendly relations with China have become significantly weaker.

During the previous Trump administration, the US–China policy significantly shifted. During his first year in office, President Trump had a positive relationship with Chinese President Xi Jinping, calling him a friend. In April 2017, he invited Xi Jinping to his Mar-a-Lago vacation home for a summit and traveled to Beijing in November. However, a trade war between the United States and China began the following year. In March 2018, President

Trump signed an executive order authorizing high tariffs on Chinese goods and, in July, the United States imposed an additional 25% tariff on more than 700 Chinese imports. China retaliated with a 25% tariff on US imports, after which the United States announced another 10% tariff on 6,031 Chinese goods. The US–China trade war was paused in December 2019 following an initial agreement between the two countries after extensive negotiations. In the meantime, the US policy toward China has taken a sharp turn.

As a result of the increased competition between the United States and China, the Korean economy has faced unprecedented challenges. South Korea has long realized its trade benefits by exporting intermediate goods to China and receiving cutting-edge science and technology from the United States, but this structure is no longer sustainable. South Korea's manufacturing sector has become highly integrated into the global supply chain and relies heavily on exporting certain items to China, such as semiconductors. For example, South Korea's reliance on exports to China was 26.8% in 2018, being greater than those to Japan (19.5%), Germany (7.1%), and France (4.2%). As the US–China trade war escalated, South Korea's exports to China declined by 9.8% from January to September 2019, the largest decline among the top 10 global trading partners. This decline was greater than those to the United Kingdom (-6.3%), Germany (-5.1%), Hong Kong (-4.6%), and Japan (-4.4%).[23]

The mutual distrust between the United States and China has extended to competition over advanced technologies, which also caused South Korea's economic woes. The first example is Huawei's 5G system. Since 2018, the United States has applied pressure to prevent using Chinese Huawei 5G equipment in the global cellular telecommunications equipment market, demanding that Huawei's equipment be banned after claiming that it had a backdoor issue that could leak information. Washington also highlighted that Huawei was directly or indirectly affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), highlighting the possibility that data could be passed on to the CCP when using Huawei equipment. Concerns have also been raised that, as the market share of Chinese-made equipment increases, Chinese authorities will try to create norms governing information and data. LG U-Plus, which accounts for approximately 10% of the South Korean telecommunications market, has long used Huawei's telecommunications equipment and continued to use such equipment for its upgrade to 5G, becoming the target of direct pressure from the United States. While the South Korean government maintained that it should not intervene in private companies' decisions, a similar decision by the United Kingdom to stop using Huawei's 5G network equipment deepened South Korea's policy concerns.

The United States began using the Indo-Pacific concept in earnest in the fall

[23] Jo Hye-jin, "Korea Is Most Affected by the US-China Trade War," KBS News, December 10, 2019. https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/pc/view/view.do?ncd=4340148

of 2017. Previously, the United States used the term "Asia-Pacific." Secretary of State Tillerson noted that, "India and the United States must foster greater prosperity and security with the aim of a free and open Indo-Pacific" in an October 2017 speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, marking the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with India. He continued, "The Indo-Pacific, including the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific, and the nations that surround them, will be the most consequential part of the globe in the 21st century."[24] This is the first time a senior US policymaker has emphasized the Indo-Pacific.

Trump administration's national security team began envisioning an Indo-Pacific strategy in late 2017. The "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific" became the basis for United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. According to this document, the primary focus of United States' Indo-Pacific strategy is to maintain its strategic advantage in the region while preventing China from establishing a "new illiberal sphere of influence."[25] The Trump administration formalized the Indo-Pacific concept by the Defense and State Departments releasing Indo-Pacific strategy reports. The existing Asia-Pacific Command was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command.

The Biden administration took office in 2021 and released its Indo-Pacific Strategy in February 2022.[26] While the Biden administration has taken a different policy direction from its predecessor in many areas, it has largely maintained the strategy of promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific.

However, the policy toward China has not changed significantly; even Trump administration's tariffs on China remained in place. The Biden administration advocated the so-called "3Cs" policy of competing with and confronting China while simultaneously cooperating where needed, such as on climate change. However, cooperation has been weak and competition has intensified against China, which was defined as an adversary.

The Biden administration institutionalized competition with China in two ways. First, it networked with allies and partners through mini-lateral coalitions and used them as a platform to compete with China. The Biden administration prioritized the Quad, a quadrilateral grouping with Japan, Australia, and India re-established by the Trump administration, by holding annual summits. In 2021, the administration formed the AUKUS with the United Kingdom and Australia to build and deliver nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and pursue cooperation in other high-tech areas. In August 2023, South Korea, the United States, and Japan held a trilateral summit at Camp David as an important step toward trilateral cooperation, which had not previously occurred due to worsening Korea–Japan relationships. The United States also promoted the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to lay the foundation for economic cooperation between

[24] Rex Tillerson, "Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century," October 18, 2017. https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson

[25] The White House, "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific." https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf. The document was released to the public on January 5, 2021, near the end of the Trump administration, under the signature of Robert C. O'Brien, the president's national security advisor at the time. It does not specify when the document was written, but a February 2018 White House memo signed by National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster indicates that the contents of the Indo-Pacific Strategy document were agreed upon at the cabinet level by November 2017 and approved by Trump on February 2, 2018. "Cabinet Memorandum on the U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific," February 15, 2018.

[26] The White House, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," February 2022.

countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

Second, the United States has taken steps to control the imports and exports to China in high-tech and science-related fields through domestic legislation. For example, the Biden administration promoted the US semiconductor industry through the Chips and Science Act passed by Congress in October 2022. It has also continued to propose regulatory measures that broadly restricted the exports of advanced semiconductor equipment and artificial intelligence (AI) chips, among others, using US technologies to China. Moreover, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) promoted the electric vehicle industry. Measures have been taken to ban imports of Chinese-made batteries and batteries made with Chinese materials and components.

The US–China rivalry is sharpening in advanced science and technology fields, including semiconductors, AI, and quantum computing. This is because these technologies are key to the nation's future industrial competitiveness and their advanced military power. In this regard, the Biden administration's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has described a so-called "small yard, high fence" policy, which involves building a high "fence" with China in some cutting-edge technology areas such as semiconductors, AI, and quantum computing while allowing normal trade in others. However, the parameters of this "yard" are highly subjective and bound to be controversial.

The US–China competition over advanced technology heavily affects the South Korean economy. South Korea's industrial structure is heavily weighted toward semiconductors and automobiles, both key targets of the US–China competition. In 2021, President Biden ordered a 100-day supply chain investigation of semiconductors, batteries, rare earth materials, and biopharmaceuticals through Executive Order 14017. While two of South Korea's largest semiconductor companies, Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix, have built and operate large semiconductor factories in China, the US restrictions on importing the equipment needed for advanced processes have raised serious questions about the sustainability of their Chinese operations.

The United States also controls the batteries used in electric vehicles through its IRA legislation. South Korea depends heavily on China for its supply of rare earth elements and key minerals used in electric vehicle batteries, such as lithium, nickel, cobalt, and graphite. For example, cobalt, used as an anode material in battery manufacturing, is produced in Africa's Democratic Republic of the Congo, but China imports most of it, processes it, and sells it to the rest of the world. Therefore, South Korea will take a substantial hit if the United States controls the import of products containing rare minerals and rare earth materials from China.

Therefore, South Korea responded by seeking an exception or a moratorium on the US government's regulatory measures and diversifying its supply chain. In February 2023, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced its "National Key Mineral Supply and Demand Crisis Response and Supply Chain Stabilization Plan" to reduce South Korea's dependence on the Chinese imports of strategic key minerals to 50% or less by 2030.

As the November 2024 presidential election in the United States approached, uncertainties on economic security fronts increased. Protectionism has increased considerably in the United States, raising the possibility of a trade war with China. The new administration will likely aggressively pursue "America First" policies. Additionally, the export control policies enacted by the Biden administration may be revoked or modified to remove existing moratoriums for detailed enforcement.

III. South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Status and Prospects

3.1 The Emergence of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

In December 2022, the South Korean government released its "Indo-Pacific Strategy of Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity." It also announced its diplomatic ambitions to become a "global pivotal state." A trilateral summit held in August 2022 at Camp David pledged to institutionalize the three countries' cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Trilateral diplomatic and security consultations are expected to become a major component of the US-led Indo-Pacific mini-lateral groupings, along with the Quad and AUKUS.

This diplomatic move by the Yoon administration marked a notable change in the direction of South Korea's foreign policy. This is especially true for the post-2017 period, when the Indo-Pacific debate was in full swing. The geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific entered South Korea's foreign policy debate in earnest in the second half of 2017 and in 2018, when the United States Trump administration officially began to invoke the concept; the Indo-Pacific Strategy was born, and the existing Asia-Pacific Command changed to the Indo-Pacific Command.

This new strategic alignment occurred due to the need to counter the rising China, which had become more authoritarian at home and assertive in its foreign relations. The Indo-Pacific is a geopolitical concept that meets this strategic need. The United States hoped that the US–South Korean alliance would adjust its role according to these needs. However, Korea's Moon administration rejected or had reservations about adjusting its alliance with the Indo-Pacific as a core concept. This was partly due to unfamiliarity with the geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific but, more fundamentally, due to two concerns about its relations with China. First, the shock of China's THAAD retaliation against South Korea, following the United States' deployment of its 2016 THAAD missile system, was still fresh in their minds. With China accounting for a large share of South Korea's total trade (approximately 30%), South Koreans feared another round of economic retaliation from Beijing. Second, the Moon administration focused on its North Korean policy, labeled the "Korean Peninsula peace process," and hoped for China's cooperation in this regard, but worried that if it actively cooperated with the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, China might push back and become less cooperative toward North Korea.

Rather than responding to United States' request for an increased Indo-Pacific cooperation, South Korea chose to focus on the New Southern Policy.

As the New Southern Policy was designed to diversify economic relations by targeting Southeast Asia due to China's THAAD retaliation, cooperation in the security arena has been limited.

While South Korea has kept to the sidelines, the US-led Indo-Pacific mini-lateral network has rapidly expanded. Australia is a key player in this network. Specifically, bordering both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Australia has been an active supporter of the Indo-Pacific concept since the publication of its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.

As a US–Japan–India–Australia quad-lateral meeting revived by the Trump administration, the Quad has been further developed by the Biden administration to become a summit-level meeting. The AUKUS, an Australia–UK–US alliance, is working on a project to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and cooperation in advanced defense technologies.

Soon after its inauguration in May 2022, the Yoon administration began preparing a strategic report based on the geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific. The North America Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was designated as the primary office in charge, although it was under the direction and supervision of the National Security Office of the President's Office. The fact that the North American Bureau was the lead office in preparing the strategy paper suggests that South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy was strongly US-oriented. In other words, the willingness to resonate with and align with United States' Indo-Pacific strategy was the basic motivation for creating the strategy paper.

The 20th Presidential Transition Committee released a report titled "The 110 National Tasks of the Yoon Suk Yeol Government" shortly before the government's inauguration in May 2022. The "East Asian Diplomacy Based on Liberal Democratic Values and Common Interests" section proposed "expanding US-ROK cooperation for economic security [and] Indo-Pacific regional and global cooperation" as a policy goal. Notably, the term "Indo-Pacific" was not used during the previous administration and was introduced in the context of expanding US–South Korean cooperation, suggesting that strengthening ties with the United States was the primary focus of the Indo-Pacific concept.[27]

On November 11, 2022, as the Indo-Pacific Strategy Paper was finalized, President Yoon made the first public presentation of the South Korean version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy at the ROK–ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In a joint statement after the November 13 South Korea–US–Japan trilateral summit, President Yoon also emphasized that "core values, such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law, must be respected, and changes to the status quo by force must not be tolerated" and

[27] The 20th Presidential Transition Committee, "The 110 National Tasks of the Yoon Suk Yeol Government," May 3, 2022. https://www.kier.re.kr/resources/download/tpp/policy_220503.pdf (in Korean). The report was revised and published two months later, in July 2022, as The 120 National Tasks of the Yoon Suk Yeol Government.

that "freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea must be guaranteed under the principles of international law." Yoon also expressed "strong opposition to unilateral attempts to change the status quo," including "illegal maritime claims and militarization of reclaimed areas." In other words, Yoon criticized China and clarified his support for United States' position on the South China Sea issue.[28]

On December 28, 2022, The South Korean government announced its report, Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific.[29] Since the announcement of the Indo-Pacific strategy and South Korea's commitment to cooperation in the region, South Korea's role in the Indo-Pacific region has been highly anticipated. Why has South Korea shifted its policy toward embracing the Indo-Pacific concept?

As the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report emphasizes, stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific region are of national interest to South Korea as an open-trading nation and liberal democracy. However, this alone does not explain the above policy shifts. For example, South Korea's maritime transportation constantly and highly depends on safety in the South China Sea, especially in the Strait of Malacca and the Taiwan Strait. The interpretations and perceptions of this fact have changed over time.

What has changed is, first, the perception of the content of the strategic cooperation with the United States. The Moon administration emphasized cooperation, but the emphasis was on dialog and cooperation with North Korea. By contrast, under the Yoon administration, the emphasis was on securing a deterrent to North Korea's nuclear threats. A realistic judgment was made that denuclearization and peace are difficult to achieve through dialog with North Korea; hence, the priority policy goal became deterring North Korea's existing nuclear threat. To this end, the South Korean administration emphasized the credibility of the US extended deterrence commitment and strengthened the US–South Korea alliance. Strengthening the alliance meant seeking strategic clarity, as opposed to the ambiguity that characterized South Korea's position between Washington and Beijing.

Second, concerns exist regarding the possibility of diplomatic isolation, as South Korea was excluded from the United States' active organization of a mini-lateral network in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States sought to maintain order in the region by working closely with its various allies and partners, and expected South Korea, as a major ally, to play a greater regional role. It also began to emphasize the regional role of the US–South Korea alliance. However, South Korea wanted to remain in an alliance centered on the Korean Peninsula, which fostered the sense of the "same bed, but different dreams" among the allies. To strengthen this alliance, it is necessary to restore coordination; South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy expresses its willingness to do so.

[28] Bae Ji-hyun, "President Yoon's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' Only Includes the US and Japan, No Asia," Hankyoreh Shinmun, November 14, 2022. https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/defense/1067056.html

[29] President of the Republic of Korea, "Yoon Administration Releases Final Report on 'Indo-Pacific Strategy for Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity'." https://www.president.go.kr/newsroom/press/HC81lhZw

Third, South Korea's announcement of its Indo-Pacific strategy reflects its changing perception of China after the 2016 THAAD retaliation greatly increased the former's vigilance against the risks posed by the latter. Subsequently, China's aggressive foreign behavior and assertiveness have significantly deteriorated South Korea's public opinion of it. This trend has been particularly pronounced among the younger generations, significantly decreasing the number of students pursuing China-related university majors. This shift in public opinion has also affected policies indirectly. With the new public opinion, politicians no longer need to adhere to policies emphasizing the relations with China.

However, the fact that China remains an important investment and trade partner in South Korea's foreign economic relations has not changed either rapidly or much.[30] While South Korea's diversification of economic ties has been underway for years after China's THAAD retaliation and will continue to accelerate, a complete economic break from China is unlikely. Therefore, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy differs from the United States's in that the former does not characterize China as an adversary. It emphasizes that this is a strategy for freedom, peace, and prosperity in the region, not one to exclude and contain China. Hence, inclusiveness is considered as a cooperative principle of these strategies. The other principles are trust and reciprocity, emphasizing a relationship with China based on mutual respect.

3.2 Perspectives and Challenges for Korea

Since the release of South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in December 2022, domestic and international expectations that South Korea's role in the Indo-Pacific region will significantly expand have increased. The Yoon government—led by the Bureau of Strategic Planning at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—also prepared an action plan for the Indo-Pacific Strategy, announced in December 2023.[31] However, nearly two years after the release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, there are mixed feelings that South Korea's role in the Indo-Pacific has not been as visible as expected. While the Indo-Pacific Strategy and Implementation Plan proposes an abstract strategic vision and goals, it does not detail what will be done, or how. To make South Korea's presence in the Indo-Pacific more visible, its navy would need to become proactive through such tasks as conducting Freedom of Navigation operations in the South China Sea, either on its own or with friendly nations, or announcing a plan for how South Korea would react in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

However, South Korea's constraints have hindered these actions. The first is naval power, as the South Korea Navy was primarily developed in response to North Korean threats. Although it aspires to become a "blue ocean" navy, it cannot currently achieve this aspiration.

[30] In 2023, trade with China was valued at USD 267.6 billion, making China South Korea's largest trading partner.

[31] The Government of the Republic of Korea, "The Action Plan."

The ROK Navy desired to acquire light aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines, and the introduction of light carriers was actively discussed at one point during the Moon administration. Even though the government announced its Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea's top defense priority remained to counter the threat from North Korea and its defense budget was allocated accordingly.

Another constraint hampered South Korea's relationship with China. While the Yoon administration often made strong and critical statements about China in its early years at the highest levels, including the president, its rhetoric has subsequently softened. China's posture toward South Korea has also softened, especially since the November 2023 US–China summit, under which the two countries agreed to compete but did not let the competition become catastrophic. The South Korean government has responded by managing its relationship with China, while promoting pragmatic cooperation wherever possible. In a visit to Singapore ahead of an ASEAN meeting, President Yoon delivered the Singapore Lecture, in which he emphasized the importance of a bilateral relationship with China: "China is a very important country for Korea in all areas, including security, economy, and investment."[32] Yoon also nominated his former chief of staff, Kim Dae Ki, to serve as ambassador to China, a move that some have interpreted as a way to send a "friendly message" to China for facilitating President Xi Jinping's visit to Gyeongju, Korea, for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in 2025.[33]

However, these constraints do not make South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy impossible. South Korea can still make several positive contributions to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, which can be expanded further. First, it has contributed to maritime domain awareness. Many developing countries in the Indo-Pacific region lack the equipment, facilities, and capabilities to recognize what is occurring at sea, including ship movements. South Korea can support the capability expansion of regional countries; Japan is already actively providing such support.

Second, coast guard cooperation should be promoted. In the Indo-Pacific Ocean, especially in the South China Sea, China often uses gray-zone tactics to mobilize civilian ships rather than military vessels. To address this problem, coast guards must increase their capabilities. Support for increasing coast guards' capacity for countries in the region—especially those with maritime territorial disputes with China—is important and is something that South Korea can do well.

The third aspect involves cooperation for maintaining, repairing, and operating military vessels. While South Korea has world-class shipbuilding technologies and capabilities, the United States, the world's largest naval power, faces a declining shipbuilding industry. This has limited the latter's

[32] The President of the Republic of Korea, "The 47th Singapore Lecture by His Excellency Yoon Suk Yeol, President of the Republic of Korea," October 9, 2024. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/events/singapore-lecture/the-47th-singapore-lecture-by-his-excellency-yoon-suk-yeol/

[33] Park Tae-in, "Kim Dae-ki Nominated for Ambassador to China...'Friendly Message to China, Which the President's Closest Aide Resented,'" JoongAng Ilbo, October 15, 2024. https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25284212

ability to build, maintain, and repair advanced military vessels, even as China's naval power was significantly strengthened. South Korea, as an ally, can directly help maintain and repair US and friendly countries' military vessels, which is critical to balancing power and maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific region.[34] Therefore, South Korea's contribution to and presence in this region could be enhanced if the government realigns its strategy.

[34] Jeon Nam-hyeok, "Maintenance Agreement with the US Navy'... K Shipbuilding Enters the 20 Trillion Market in Full Swing," DongA Ilbo, July 23, 2024. https://www.donga.com/news/Economy/article/all/20240722/126059466/2; Louella Desiderio, "Cerberus, HD Hyundai to kickstart Subic Operations in 12–18 Months," The Philippine Star, May 16, 2024. https://www.philstar.com/business/2024/05/16/2355369/cerberus-hd-hyundai-kickstart-subic-operations-12-18-months

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I. Introduction

Singapore was characterized as one of Asia's four tiger economies in the 1980s and the 1990s, and formally recognized for being well managed. It eventually became an emulative model for many developing nations. Yet, the city-state's leadership has never regarded its island republic's future success with assuredness. Leadership figures often perceived Singapore's prospects in uncertain terms.[1] Although such a guarded outlook might be seen as excessively pessimistic, which is characteristic of the overwhelming discourse on vulnerability in Singapore's strategic culture,[2] elite concerns over challenges to Singapore's long-term national security are justified.

This tiny island republic is young, having celebrated only 59 years of statehood by 2024. Like other microstates in the international community, its leadership and people fear fading into irrelevance. This study identifies three key issues facing Singapore. The first is Singapore's precarious position in a region that is facing increasing tensions; the second is protecting Singapore's multiculturalism in the face of growing narrative operations from external agencies; and finally, ensuring peaceful living in a multi-racial society such as Singapore. These issues are interrelated. The way ahead is charting a course that considers the talons of the bald eagle, namely, the U.S, and the claws of the dragon, namely, the People's Republic of China (PRC), two powers that have, in recent decades, attempted to shape and influence the geopolitics of Southeast Asia.

1.1 Identifying the Key Risks

1.1.1 Between Washington and Beijing

Former Singapore prime ministers Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew likened Singapore to Sampan[3] or a small sailing vessel endemic to East Asia. They contrasted the Singapore sample with an aircraft carrier as a metaphor for the U.S. This maritime analogy was used to support the narrative that Singapore had to have tight social discipline and could not be governed in a

[1] Kishore Mahbubani, "Can Singapore survive? (New Updated Edition)," Straits Times Press, December 2021.

[2] Fredie Tan, "The national security thinking of Australia and Singapore," The Forge, November 16, 2020. https://theforge.defence.gov.au/article/national-security-thinking-australia-and-singapore

[3] Koh Buck Song, "Sink the old sampan, S'pore now a cruise ship," Straits Times, January 27, 2016. http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/sink-the-old-sampan-spore-now-a-cruise-ship

liberal fashion like the U.S., because instability could jeopardize the survival or progress of this small island republic. Conversely, the U.S. could be far less regulated in its internal affairs, since any domestic disruption would not threaten U.S. national continuity. That is, many emergencies could threaten the seaworthiness of a sampan but few could rock an aircraft carrier. As a small nation, Singapore, for example, is vulnerable to environmental forces that may interrupt its course or even bring it to the bottom of the sea—a possibility that Singapore's leadership is keenly aware of.

Correspondingly, nations, like small sailing vessels, serve as a compelling metaphorical rationalization for international security and economic interdependence. Such an analogy implies that a trading or fishing sampan requires pirate-free sailing routes and ports of call unencumbered by war or conflict. An interdependent relationship exists whereby economic seafarers trade port fees and obey the state maritime authority for nautical law enforcement and naval peace preservation, which are elements upheld by the metaphorical aircraft carrier flying the U.S. flag.

Singapore counts on the U.S. as a key security partner, with many mutually beneficial military links[4], including

- contributing to U.S.-led coalitions against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and counter-piracy efforts off the Horn of Africa;
- purchasing U.S. military equipment since the 1970s worth billions of dollars;
- enabling the training of Republic of Singapore Air Force's (RSAF) personnel by the U.S. Air Force since 1996; and
- hosting a U.S. Navy (USN) logistics base in Singapore, along with frequent rotational deployments of USN warships and aircraft through the former's naval and air bases.

This shows that Washington has geostrategic support from a key member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which allows the former to more easily project military power onto the South China Sea (SCS) and the airspace above it. In return, Singapore receives cutting-edge defense technology and first-rate military training from the world's only hyperpower, [5] which possibly makes the former among a rather small minority of microstates that can implement a deterrence-based defense policy.

For decades, Singapore and the U.S. have enjoyed these beneficial ties. However, the seas in which Singapore Sampan has been sailing have begun to show signs of riptides. Singapore enjoyed economic ties with the PRC starting as early as the 1980s. In the decades that followed, the mutual financial and business investments between the two nations fostered strong economic ties.

[4] Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. security cooperation with Singapore," U.S. Department of State, April 12, 2023. https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-singapore/

[5] "To Paris, U.S. looks like a hyperpower," New York Times, April 2, 1999. https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/05/news/to-paris-us-looks-like-a-hyperpower.html

In the economic domain, Singapore–China ties are significant, contributing to and expanding Singapore's financial viability. Considering the island republic's minuscule size, bilateral trade and investment are remarkably substantial.[6] For 2023, critical value-added PRC imports from Singapore totaled US$24.65 billion while similar economically/industrially important Chinese exports to Singapore during the same duration were valued at US$45.75 billion. Bilateral trade mainly consists of value-added manufactured products/capital goods and essential industrial commodities, implying that this economic relationship cannot be easily substituted by other trade competitors. With reference to foreign investment, the PRC invested US$272.44 million and US$1.4 billion in Singapore in 2023 and 2022, respectively.[7] On the latter's part, it accumulated US$179.41 billion in investment assets in China from 2013 to 2022.[8] It is evident that Singapore and mainland China share a mutually beneficial economic relationship that both would like to preserve. However, in recent decades, the PRC's currents have begun to cross with those of the U.S.

1.1.2 Diversity is a Vulnerability

Having established the pull that both Washington and Beijing exert on Singapore for two paramount pillars of national interest, namely, military security and economic progress, it is pertinent to shift analytical gear and analyze the island state's multiethnic and multilinguistic resident population, which can be a critical weakness if either the U.S. or the PRC attempt an influential campaign to sway foreigners to politically support either one.

Notwithstanding the political dominance of the ruling People's Action Party, which has governed Singapore since its independence in 1965, any government would desire unified support from a critical mass of the population so that independent domestic and foreign policies can be formulated free of foreign interference. Such an ideal paradigm would be threatened if any foreign power were able to manipulate the opinions of voters and/or residents such that the former could exert pressure on the government and/or instigate societal disruptions to coerce local authorities.

Unlike nations such as Japan and Korea, which are blessed with a high degree of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, thereby making it easier for their governments to cultivate and subsequently call on national solidarity to support autonomous policies that may oppose the interests of foreign powers, Singapore has an ethnic and cultural makeup that predisposes it to soft power pressure from both China and the U.S.

Despite being a British colony from 1819 to 1963, unfettered immigration from China throughout the 19th century, and much of the first half of the

[6] Guilia Interesse, "Singapore-China bilateral relations: Trade and investment outlook," ASEAN Briefing, June 12, 2024. https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/singapore-china-bilateral-relations-trade-and-investment-outlook/

[7] Tsubasa Suruga, "Singapore's investment pledges from U.S., China dropped in 2023," Nikkei Asia, January 30, 2024. https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Singapore-s-investment-pledges-from-u.s.-china-dropped-in-2023

[8] "Singapore's portfolio investment assets in China from 2013 to 2022," Statista, 2024. https://www.statista.com/statistics/996625/singapore-investment-assets-in-china/

20th century, led to an ethnic Chinese supermajority in Singapore's population. This was reinforced by a further influx of immigrants from the PRC from around 2005 to the present day, which led to 74% of the current resident population becoming ethnic Chinese.[9] Even though vernacular Chinese language education was discontinued by 1987 in favor of all schools employing English as a first language of instruction[10] and English being officially used in parliament, the civil service, large businesses, and the military, the official language of the PRC, Mandarin, still has an emotional and cultural hold on the ethnic Chinese population. Indeed, among Singapore residents who still watch free-to-air TV, the majority (58.1%) prefer to view Mandarin media rather than English entertainment and news channels (33.5%).[11]

As a result, many ethnically Chinese foreigners, to say nothing of new immigrants from the PRC, are receptive to Mandarin-based messaging and soft power from Beijing, which the latter duly exploits. Examples and instances are explored in Part 2 of this study, along with how even non-voting foreign residents can critically disrupt the social stability required for Singapore to function as an international business hub.

Concerning the U.S. influence on Singapore, this is an entirely different kettle of fish since Washington does not have to take active measures such as co-opting influential locals to champion its policy stances or using active messaging to shape Singapore's views in the desired directions. Indeed, this is unnecessary because swathes of the population already exist across the Chinese majority and Indian as well as indigenous Malay minorities who prefer the U.S. in some way, shape, or form.

Washington had formal relations with Singapore far longer than Beijing, as the U.S. established diplomatic relations in 1965, while official Singapore–China ties only began in 1990. Additionally, U.S. soft power in the form of movies, broadcast entertainment, popular culture, tertiary education, cuisine, and even video games has an undeniably pervasive and effective impact on Asians. As for the linguistic medium of U.S. sociocultural influence, English is the first language of Western-educated Chinese foreigners, is fairly well used among Singapore's Indian and Malay minorities, and is at least functionally understood or vocationally used by those who prefer Mandarin.[12]

Thus, the U.S. influence on Singapore is welcomed by pro-Western elites and is, at the very least, accepted as a geopolitical reality by the rest of the population. This view of U.S. power and presence was reflected in a 2023 survey by the New York-based Eurasia Group Foundation, which found that 64% of Asians thought the U.S. had a positive influence on Singapore.[13] This raises the question of how to manage a population that is Asian in nature but Western in character. Ultimately, popular receptivity toward the two

[9] Raudhah Hirschmann, "Resident population in Singapore as of June 2023, by ethnic group," Statista, 2024. http://www.statista.com/statistics/622748/singapore-resident-population-by-ethnic-group/

[10] Stephanie Ho, "Vernacular education," National Library Board (Singapore), September 29, 2016. https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=715bc06a-0ed3-4fb3-b363-268c87b394ac

[11] "Free-to-air TV has the widest reach here," Today, November 6, 2015. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/free-air-tv-has-widest-reach-here

[12] With the discontinuation of ethnic vernacular schools in 1987, all Singaporeans aged 44 or younger have experienced at least 10 years of compulsory education in an English-medium school. The fact that the vast majority of Singaporean youth still study to qualify for a challenging British secondary school certification, the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level exams, means that most working Singaporeans are functionally conversant in and literate in English.

[13] Charissa Yong, "Mixed views in Asia on U.S.'s and China's influence in the region: Poll," The Straits Times, October 2, 2023. https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/mixed-views-in-asia-on-us-and-china-s-influence-in-the-region-poll

most consequential Pacific powers matters because of a likely difference between what the Western-trained policy-making elites and their Western-educated intelligentsia advisors think, and how a substantial chunk of their PRC favoring the electorate will vote in the next elections.

1.1.3 If and When the Eagle and Dragon Duel

Having established that the U.S. and China are important military security and economic partners, respectively, from Singapore's perspective, we can logically understand why Singapore wants to preserve this status quo. As such, it has declaratively maintained a geopolitically neutral stance between these two great powers and has demonstrated its intent by maintaining membership in the international forum for ostensibly neutral states, the Non-Aligned Movement.[14] To substantiate its desire not to unambiguously take either Washington's or Beijing's side in any major Asian dispute, Singapore has refused to officially become either a U.S. or Chinese ally, while not wanting other countries to view it as an ally of either power.

Regarding Beijing, the city-state has not inked any agreements to provide economic or humanitarian assistance for any kind of PRC to find itself in need. Correspondingly, military cooperation is limited or even cosmetic in nature. A good example of these are counterterrorism exercises (often seen as proverbial "low hanging fruit" in international security cooperation), the last of which was held in 2010, more than 14 years ago.[15] Concerning the U.S., Singapore has openly emphasized that it is not an American treaty ally, thereby having no formal obligation to provide military assistance to the U.S. under any circumstances, while not expecting that U.S. forces would aid Singapore if the latter were attacked.[16]

However, the best laid plans of small states can easily be upset by realpolitik maneuvers or violent contestation by the Great Powers. Two hypothetical case scenarios involving conflict between the U.S. and PRC are elaborated in Part 2, but at this point, it should suffice to posit that either side would seek to reinforce legitimacy and bolster political, material, and even military support during a time of conflict. This might well be achieved by encouraging more regional states to join, or at the very least support, a coalition on either Washington's or Beijing's side. Such a possibility may even spiral into an absolutist and partisan ultimatum that leaves no room for neutrality.

As with the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and the Pentagon by Al-Qaeda, the U.S. could tell every East Asian associate nation that it is either "with us or against us."[17] This neatly divides the region into allies/coalition supporters, who can be counted upon, and adversaries, who must be countered.

[14] "NAM and G77," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore. https://www.mfa.gov.sg/SINGAPORES-FOREIGN-POLICY/International-Organisations/NAM-and-G77

[15] Dylan M. H. Loh, "China's rising foreign ministry: Practices and representations of assertive diplomacy," Stanford University Press, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcae015

[16] Lan Yun Zhou, "Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong: Close cooperation between Singapore and the U.S. does not mean that S'pore will be involved in the US's wars (translated from Chinese)," Lian He Zao Bao (United Morning News), April 10, 2022. https://web.archive.org/web/20220410122539/https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/Singapore/story20220410-1261418

[17] George W. Bush, "Address to a joint session of Congress and the American people," The White House Archives, September 20, 2001. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html

In this political paradigm, preserving ostensible non-alignment in Singapore has become drastically more difficult. As can be implied from the earlier section 1.1.1. "Between Washington and Beijing," both the U.S. and PRC have impactful security or economics-based levers, which can serve as carrots or sticks to persuade Singapore to pick a side. Such decisions could have serious domestic political consequences. For instance, the decision to expand participation in more U.S.-led multilateral military exercises might be ignored by the latter during peacetime, but an inked agreement to help repair and maintain U.S. military hardware during any potential war with China might arguably elicit a backlash in subsequent elections. With this in mind, we can see why maintaining balanced policies vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing is important for domestic sociopolitical stability, and, from the perception of Singapore's ruling party, likely to become more precarious if U.S.–China relations deteriorate.

Whichever path the government eventually takes, it will have to deal with the political proclivities of the various electoral factions whose cultural-linguistic affinities predispose them to favor either China, the U.S., or Western World. The challenge for Singapore's leadership is to convince the majority that whatever was decided was in the city-state's sacrosanct national interest while managing any societal disruptions from those who felt that the wrong national route was taken during an acute regional crisis.

The above preliminary analysis shows that i) military security and economic influence connect Singapore with Washington and Beijing, respectively, along with ii) linguistic and cultural characteristics of the city-state's ethnic Chinese population, which predisposes them to either U.S. or PRC political messaging, and iii) the eventual difficult alignment decision that the island republic's political elite will have to take when faced with intractable U.S.–China conflict. These are, together, parts of an interlinked tri-faceted national survival paradigm that Singapore might well have to face and surmount in the future. These three interrelated facets present one complex dynamic that has equal importance vis-à-vis one another and comprise Singapore's primary or principal threat perception matrix. The next section addresses the city-state's second-order and secondary concerns.

1.2 Singapore's Second Order National Concerns

This section examines the contemporary and emerging security considerations that are starting to rock Singapore Sampan. However, the Singapore Sampan is used to being rocked from time to time by external elements, such as terrorism, climate change, and cyber security, which will be analyzed, and their second-order importance will be substantiated.

Terrorism is a salient threat of an evergreen nature that crops up from time

to time whenever a regional attack occurs.[18] Despite extensive coverage in the press and social media, the Singapore government has effectively managed the threat through vigorous enforcement and legal measures, including specialized military units such as the Army Deployment Force[19] and the Special Operations Task Force, along with domestic investigative agencies such as the Internal Security Department,[20] which possesses extensive investigative powers. Legally, individuals indoctrinated by terrorist organizations but who have yet to perpetrate attacks can also be detained as a precaution.[21] Consequently, no terrorist incidents have occurred in Singapore since the hijacking of Singapore Airlines flight SQ117 in 1991 by hijackers claiming to be from the Pakistani People's Party.[22]

Turning to climate change, Singapore is relatively flat. This is worrisome because of rising global sea levels, which is a chronic but not critical concern for Singapore. Inasmuch as climate change cannot be ignored, it tends to be a global issue that affects all states rather than the city-state. Singapore also employs civil engineering solutions, such as flood control systems and dykes,[23] akin to what the Dutch have done to keep much of Holland dry, despite much of their nation being below sea level. The government is doing its best to contribute to alleviating climate change by implementing renewable hydroelectric energy from Laos[24] and solar power from Australia,[25] along with encouraging the adoption of electric vehicles. Although climate change is a persistent issue, its effects can be mitigated and managed in the short term, whereas long-term solutions have been explored for implementation.

The digital age has led to cyberattacks or cybersecurity becoming prominent objects of national anxiety. This situation is not unique to Singapore. The majority of cyberattacks against Singapore have been commercial fraud or of a criminal nature,[26] thus making this a local law enforcement issue rather than an external threat to Singapore's sovereignty. In Singapore, cybersecurity and better law enforcement against cybercrime have received government attention. Strong legal frameworks to cope with cybercrime have been introduced,[27] and the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, directing IT defense measures, has been established.[28] Thus, similar to terrorism and climate change, this is a chronic problem of secondary rather than primary importance.

In summary, the three aforementioned problems are persistent, manageable, and non-critical issues that flare up periodically. They are easier to remediate from Singapore's perspective than external and internal national security threats arising from the Great Power influence and conflict. As already discussed, measures have already been taken to address these second-order concerns over the long run, making such problems equally relevant among themselves, and thus deserving equitable attention from authorities, which makes comparative ranking or priority unnecessary.

[18] Amir Yusof, "Malaysia arrests 7 people after attack on Johor police post by Jemaah Islamiyah suspect kills 2 cops," Channel News Asia, May 17, 2024. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-johor-police-officers-killed-attack-jemaah-islamiyah-4343051

[19] Jeremy Koh, "SAF to fight terror with rapid response," The Straits Times, July 1, 2016. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/saf-to-fight-terror-with-rapid-response

[20] Internal Security Department, Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024. https://www.mha.gov.sg/isd

[21] Internal Security Act 1960, Singapore Statutes Online, 2020 revised edition. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/ISA1960

[22] Choy Choi Kee, "1991 – SQ117 rescue," Ministry of Defense Singapore, March 7, 1999. https://archive.ph/20120805141950/http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/about_us/history/maturing_saf/v03n03_history.html

[23] Sheryl Tian Tong Lee, Selina Xu, and Isabel Kua, "How the tiny island city-state of Singapore fights rising sea levels," Time Magazine, October 10, 2023. https://time.com/6322111/singapore-fights-rising-sea-levels-climate-change/

[24] Ng Hong Siang, "Singapore begins importing renewable energy from Laos through Thailand and Malaysia," Channel News Asia, June 23, 2022. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-import-hydropower-renewable-energy-laos-through-thailand-malaysia-2766251

[25] "Australia approves US$13.5 billion project to export solar power to Singapore," Channel News Asia, August 21, 2024. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/australia-approves-us135-billion-project-export-solar-power-singapore-renewable-energy-4557796

[26] "Top 9 major cyber attacks in Singapore 2024," FirstCom Academy, August 18, 2023. https://www.fca.edu.sg/blog/top-major-cyber-attacks-in-singapore/

[27] "Cybersecurity Act," Cyber Security Agency of Singapore. https://www.csa.gov.sg/legislation/Cybersecurity-Act

1.3 Research Perceptions: Findings and Limitations

Official Singapore Government pronouncements or white papers on the three principal issues of this study are absent or scarce. Among the white papers published by Singapore's authorities in recent years, including those covering topics such as the response to COVID-19 (released in 2023), development of local women (released in 2023), and policies for a healthier population (released in 2022), the author of this study regards none as vital national security or national interest challenges. Instead, based on the cited research for this study as well as other consulted sources, the origins of such sources as well as their frequency are shown in Table 1 below, thus providing a picture of who is cognizant of the three national issues highlighted in this study, or is aware of related/ancillary concepts. The majority of research sources are also quite contemporary, from the 2010s to the present.

Table 1. Overview of type of sources discussing national issues, 2010–present.

RESEARCH SOURCE ORIGIN	FREQUENCY
Former/current Singaporean Senior Civil Servant, Diplomat, Politician, or Government-affiliated Academic	4
Government-controlled or licensed Press	8
Singapore Government Websites	5
Academics from or affiliated with Singaporean Universities	4
Foreign Government Webpages	8
Foreign Press	12
Foreign Scholars/Academics	8
Foreign Research Websites	18

Regarding groups not covered above, public perception in Singapore tends to accept what the government narrates, leading to a lack of critical or evaluative analysis from the general public, specifically foreign policy and defense matters, with the exception of military conscription policies. Indeed, Asians are generally politically apathetic, and such mindsets have been

[28] "The Singapore Cybersecurity Strategy 2021," Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, 2021. https://www.csa.gov.sg/docs/default-source/csa/documents/publications/the-singapore-cybersecurity-strategy-2021.pdf

prevalent since the 1970s.[29] This could change in the face of sustained and well-implemented information campaigns by foreign powers designed to influence the population.

Local media are largely state-controlled[30] and have been so since the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act of 1974, which gives the government total control over the circulation of print media.[31] Hence, the main role of local media is to explain government policies to the general public. Based on the author's personal experience, little critical analysis can be expected. Often, such evaluative articles come from foreign media, particularly from the West. As indicated in Table 1, even if output from senior Singapore government figures and government websites are aggregated together with local media, such sources are outnumbered by coverage from foreign governments, media, and research entities with an online presence (17 vs. 38) by a factor of 1 to 2.23. While not all foreign coverage is analytical or critical in nature, the island republic's authorities view the subject matter of this study as sensitive and would not draw attention to it.

Academic perceptions or perspectives, most of which date from 2016 onward, tend to be from foreign scholars/academics rather than Singapore universities (eight vs. four), but are still comparatively few, which makes this study's analytical coverage relatively fresh and salient. This is especially so because this work explores not only foreign policy and defense matters but also social/ethnic and economic perspectives.

The analysis provided in this paper thus suggests that any PRC information campaign targeted at foreigners can achieve results because of the aforementioned deficit in local and public discussion about foreign policy, national security, or even societal matters. The strongest perceptions and analyses of these issues tend to come from former senior civil servants or government-linked academics within the last five years, who have been chosen as official representatives to push back against the views of the Great Power. In any future contestation of the minds and hearts of voting foreigners, such selective championing may not be sufficient.

[29] Teo Kay Key, "Are Singaporeans really politically apathetic?" Today, April 8, 2021. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/publications/details/are-singaporeans-really-politically-apathetic

[30] "Singapore media guide," BBC News, May 23, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15966553

[31] "Newspaper and Printing Presses Act 1974," Singapore Statutes Online, 2020 revised edition. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/NPPA1974

II. Analysis of Key Security Concerns

2.1 Security from the Eagle and Economic Ties with the Dragon

Having explained the principal foreign policy and domestic challenges to Singapore's national security, it is pertinent to explain how America and China came to feature prominently among the city-states' prime concerns. Simply put, Singapore's military security relationship and economic links with the U.S. and PRC, respectively, are largely outcomes of historical circumstances and the decisions of the city-state's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

The island republic's military history is fairly unique, having British ceremonies and traditions influenced by the presence of British troops over 144 years as a crown colony, and having Israeli military advisors from 1965–1974 to establish the Singapore Armed Forces doctrinal, training, and tactical foundations, which still endure to the present day. The U.S. arguably has had one of the most significant influences on the city-state's national security, being responsible for maintaining stability in Southeast Asia even after its military withdrawal from Vietnam in 1972. Peace and security were assured throughout the Cold War by the U.S. military presence in Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base in the Philippines and U.S. Air Force deployments to Udorn Air Base in Thailand until 1976. Thus, the balance of power against the communist bloc of Asia, including the PRC- and USSR-supported Vietnamese, was maintained by the U.S. military, much to the relief of the ASEAN, of which Singapore was a founding member.

To a similar extent, such a balancing act is still seen in current times with the USN's Freedom of Navigation Operations in the SCS demonstrably pushing against Beijing's "9-Dashed Line" oceanic claim in the SCS and U.S. military rotational deployments through Philippine military installations under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, with the implication that such forces could be readily diverted to respond to any SCS crisis under the auspices of the U.S.–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT).

On the material front, Washington's support was pivotal to building SAF's equipment profile so that the latter could uphold a credible defense for Singapore. Since the mid-1970s,[32] the former has approved the export of armored vehicles, cutting-edge multi-role combat aircraft,[33] and both advanced air defense[34] as well as ground attack precision-guided munitions[35] necessary to prosecute modern conventional warfare as part of a deterrence-based national defense strategy. Apart from the Air Force training mentioned at the beginning of Part 1, the SAF participates in regular

[32] Emrys Chew, Geoffrey Till, and Joshua Ho (Eds.), "Globalisation and Defence in the Asia Pacific: Arms Across Asia," Routledge, 2009, p. 173.

[33] "Singapore – F-35B Short Take-Off and Vertical Landing (STOVL) aircraft," Defense Science Cooperation Agency News Release, January 9, 2020. https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/singapore_20-06.pdf

[34] "Singapore – AIM-9X Sidewinder missiles," Defense Science Cooperation Agency News Release, April 4, 2013. https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/singapore_13-04_0.pdf

[35] "Singapore – Air-to-ground munitions kits and services," Defense Science Cooperation Agency News Release, February 9, 2023. https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/Press%20Release%20-%20Singapore%2023-03%20CN.pdf

bilateral exercises with the U.S. Navy, Army, and Marine Corps,[36] substantially improving the former's operational competence despite the SAF's lack of combat experience. Such close military ties over nearly five decades have entrenched Washington as a key national security facilitator for Singapore, with the logical inference that it would be extremely difficult to supplement the importance of the former in the latter's foreign policy strategy.

Singapore–China economic ties also have historical roots but began with decisions made by the city-state's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew rather than the paradigm of Cold War rivalries. Based on Lee's memoirs,[37] amid deeply souring relations between Moscow and Beijing, the latter, from the 1960s, tried to garner support from the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia via propaganda radio broadcasts, thus spreading the message of Chinese communism. Rightly fearing the subversion of their Chinese ethnic minorities into potential rebellious fifth columns, the governments of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia adopted stances of open hostility vis-à-vis the PRC.

As a sign of his ability to deal with the Communist Party of China(CPC), Lee advised the CPC to cease or tone down these broadcasts. This suggestion was eventually accepted in 1980[38] after Singapore initiated unofficial relations with the PRC in the latter half of the 1970s.[39] During subsequent visits to the PRC in the 1980s, Lee was critical of mainland China's economic development efforts and offered to host CPC officials in Singapore for educational/learning stints to develop better economic/industrial policies upon their return home.

While we can never know Lee's true motivations for forging closer Singapore–China ties, or if he ever realized that Singapore might in the future be vulnerable to Chinese economic pressure, it can be posited that he saw himself as a respected statesman and wanted to play the role of the leader who supported and encouraged the paramount leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, to institute reforms that would enable Chinese participation in the international economy, thereby burnishing Lee's legacy as one among a handful of leaders, including then U.S. president Richard Nixon, who facilitated the PRC's political and economic rapprochement with the non-communist world.

Nonetheless, Singapore–China business ties grew dramatically in the following years,[40] with Singapore becoming China's top ASEAN trading partner by 2002, when bilateral trade reached US$10.821 billion in 2000 and the PRC became the city-state's sixth largest trade partner. Singapore invested an accumulated US$159.04 billion in China by June 2000, which then made it the PRC's fifth largest foreign investor. When cross-referencing the Singapore–China bilateral trade and investment figures for 2022 and 2023

[36] Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. security cooperation with Singapore," U.S. Department of State, April 12, 2023. https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-singapore/

[37] Lee Kuan Yew, "From Third World to First: the Singapore Story, 1965–2000: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew," Marshall Cavendish (US), 2015.

[38] Edmund Lim, "Looking back on Deng Xiaoping's landmark visit to Singapore," The Diplomat, December 22, 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/looking-back-on-deng-xiaopings-landmark-visit-to-singapore/

[39] "Brief introduction to relations between China and Singapore," Xinhua News Agency, May 17, 2002. https://web.archive.org/web/20100307053850/http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-05/17/content_397952.htm

[40] Ibid.

given in the first section of Part 1, the island republic would clearly suffer a serious economic shock if trade and investment ties were disrupted, which is an outcome that Singapore's leaders would strive to avoid. This segues into the next section of Part 2: analyzing how Singapore's factious population would react if Singapore–China relations were ever pressured to such an extent that economic ties were interrupted.

For Singapore, both its economic vitality and military security are crucial national interests. It would be exceptionally difficult for the city-state's leaders to be forced to prioritize one over the other due to the drastically worsened U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry. This Great Power conflict would substantially impact Singapore's third critical national interest—social stability or avoidance of domestic turmoil—and is perhaps a fitting and timely analytical coincidence for this paper.

Regarding the risks of the intimate Singapore–U.S. security relationship and extensive Singapore–China economic ties, both are the result of history and, as such, have already occurred, being facts of the island republic's national reality. In Singapore, there is a memorial at the Esplanade Park dedicated to the lives lost in the fight to build a "democratic and non-communist Singapore."[41] Clearly, Singapore chose to be on the non-communist side of the Iron Curtain. In choosing a free market orientation during the Cold War, it also established national security links with the U.S., the leader of the Western Bloc. Extensive economic ties with the PRC primarily grew when mainland China was experiencing double-digit rates of economic growth, and most states with finances to spare wanted a share of the burgeoning Chinese market. It was conventional wisdom to expand trade with and invest in China, with Singapore being no exception to this rule. Also, the paramount leaders of the PRC at the time, Deng Xiaoping and his successors until the ascension of the current leader, Xi Jinping in 2012, adopted a relatively benign foreign policy vis-à-vis China's adversaries (such as the U.S.) or foreign states Beijing has an interest in (such as Singapore). Therefore, the city-state's leaders arguably did not perceive any national hazard from U.S. security links and Chinese economic relations until fairly recent times.

2.2 Heterogeneity among Singapore's Chinese Residents as a Weakness?

In his book Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,[42] Benedict Anderson posits that nations are socially constructed communities that exist only because their people perceive themselves to be part of an exclusive national group. Regardless of the factual reality, people of various nations see themselves as unique based on shared spoken/written communal language, the commonality of moral/social values, belief in the same future goals, and other aspects of group identity.

[41] Lim Yan Liang, "Marker dedicated to those involved in fight against communism unveiled at Esplanade Park," The Straits Times, December 8, 2014. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/marker-dedicated-to-those-involved-in-fight-against-communism-unveiled-at-esplanade-park

[42] Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," Verso, 1991.

In this sense, modern nationalism is a phenomenon that is felt and sustained emotionally, rather than logically derived and thereafter administratively implemented. According to Anderson, despite objective differences between individuals, a belief in national unity makes functional states capable of sacrificing state interests.[43] Which naturally prompts the question: Do there exist separate or distinct ethnic Chinese "national groups" resident in Singapore? Even though there surely exists a critical mass of people in Singapore who see themselves as exclusively Asians after decades of nation building, this sense of national identity has come under challenge given Singapore's liberal immigration policy.

Three broad politically and/or socially relevant groups of ethnic Chinese residents in Singapore were identified. The first consists of local-born Chinese foreigners whose families have been residing in the city-state for at least three generations. These people use English as a first language, are comfortable with U.S./Western popular culture, and, in many cases have, attended universities in the West, Australia, or New Zealand. Statistically, this group is the least numerous[44] but most likely to positively regard the U.S./Collective West, while supporting or at least not opposing the alignment of Singapore's policies with U.S. interests, if doing so promotes Singapore's national sustainability.

The second group includes ethnic Chinese who possess Singapore citizenship (the city-state disallows dual citizenship) but whose families have been residents in Singapore for two generations or less. Such a demographic faction comprises those with foreign-born parents (in particular, parents from the PRC), or those who might have been born in mainland China themselves, being naturalized foreigners. Inasmuch as these people may have received English-medium education in Singapore and are thus vocationally functional in English, Mandarin, or to a lesser extent, other Chinese dialects are the emotive tongue of home and mass media consumption. As mentioned in the second section of Part 1, "The Population as a Vulnerability," this subset of citizens is likely more vulnerable and, for some, more receptive to Mandarin-based messaging or influence operations from Beijing.

Indeed, it is strongly suspected that the CPC in recent years has co-opted a Chinese-born U.S. academic based in Singapore, Huang Jin, to influence local politics and public opinion,[45] and subsequently convinced a Hong Kong-born naturalized Singaporean, Philip Chan, to promote Beijing's political interests in Singapore via his public profile and articles in Singapore's Chinese language press.[46] Under a law prohibiting foreign influence in Singapore's politics and society, Huang was expelled from the city-state, while Chan was publicly censured. China spread narratives about Singapore to the effect that the latter[47]

[43] Ibid, pp. 6–7

[44] Due to its politically sensitive nature, granular census data on Chinese sub-groups in Singapore is not publicly available. Hence, the author has relied on his experience as a native-born Singaporean Chinese academic to make educated deductions about the demographic profile of Chinese residents.

[45] Richard Paddock, "Singapore orders expulsion of American academic," The New York Times, January 28, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/05/world/asia/singapore-huang-jing.html

[46] "Singapore cracks down on Chinese influence," The Economist, February 8, 2024. https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/02/08/singapore-cracks-down-on-chinese-influence

[47] Justin Ong, "Singapore particularly vulnerable yet resilient to Chinese influence operations: French report," The Straits Times, October 5, 2021. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/spore-particularly-vulnerable-yet-resilient-to-chinese-influence-operations

- is a Chinese nation that is part of and owes allegiance to "Greater China,"
- is a small state that should "know its place" and not alienate the PR
- lost its international standing with the passing of the founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew,
- is too aligned with the U.S. and should stop this policy as America is fading from prominence, even as China is ascending, and
- ought to stay neutral in the SCS dispute.

Although it is difficult to effectively measure the impact of Beijing's influence operations in Singapore, it is noteworthy that a 2022 poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre recorded 67% of Asians with a positive perception of China.[48] Similar findings were obtained in a survey conducted by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies during the same year.[49]

It is uncertain how much of the second group among Chinese Singaporeans has been swayed by the CPC's propaganda narratives, but the certainty that some have been emotionally "bought over" must be a salient worry for the island republic's policy makers, because this group may in some ways, and even unknowingly, help to encourage the spread of the PRC narrative indicated in the previous paragraph. It must be said that Singapore's diverse population does not only extend to citizens who have voting rights. Non-voting permanent residents and expatriate workers can also be sources of externally inspired or instigated social conflicts.

Correspondingly, the third group of Chinese residents in the city-state are PRC nationals legally present for reasons ranging from education to employment and business. This group is presently quite sizeable,[50] and it is not beyond the bounds of imagination that, in the event of war/conflict between China and the U.S. or any of Washington's allies such as the Philippines or Taiwan, they would be more receptive to PRC narratives and messages to support their position in any conflict. Such support might take antagonistic forms, such as protests and other types of semi-organized anti-social violence. Considering previous incidents involving mainland Chinese university students in Singapore publishing online content that insulted Singaporeans, local culture, or other ethnic minorities of the city-state in 2011[51] and 2012,[52] it might well be unrealistic to expect the large mainland Chinese expatriate community to respect local norms treating societal stability as sacrosanct. There might exist the grievously incorrect perception among this community that the island republic is a "Chinese Country." It may not even be a huge leap for them to believe that the idea of union with the PRC based on "Chineseness" is a possibility. These perceptions may encourage a psychological or emotive carte blanche to act as they please.[53]

Whether such antisocial activities are directly instigated by Beijing is inconsequential because it would damage Singapore's societal stability and business confidence. The larger consequence is fanning fissures between

[48] Maria Siow and Joseph Sipalan, "Why do Singapore and Malaysia have a more favourable view of China than the US?" South China Morning Post, July 23, 2022. https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3186192/why-do-singapore-and-malaysia-have-more-favourable-view-china-us

[49] Richard Turcsanyi and Esther Song, "South Koreans have the world's most negative views of China. Why?" The Diplomat, December 24, 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/south-koreans-have-the-worlds-most-negative-views-of-china-why/

[50] "International migrant stock 2020," United Nations Population Division. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock

[51] Liyana, "Student apologises for video parody of S'poreans," Yahoo! News, July 26, 2011. https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/student-apologises-video-parody-poreans-051024905.html

[52] Clarence Chen, "S'poreans outraged over PRC scholar's 'dog' comment," Yahoo! News, February 22, 2012. https://sg.news.yahoo.com/poreans-outraged-over-prc-scholar-dog-072146916.html

[53] On more than half a dozen different occasions, the writer has spoken to Chinese Singaporeans who have encountered jingoistic PRC military officials and even private citizens, who have expressed nationalist viewpoints asserting mainland Chinese hegemony over Singapore, such that China "owns" Singapore.

those who are pro-PRC and those who are not, tarring the island republic's reputation as a business-friendly oasis in a tumultuous world.

Such a threat would be critically worrying for Singapore's leaders because foreign-inspired communal violence is no stranger to Singapore. In 1984, the Hindu–Sikh riots in India were sparked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, creating tension in Singapore. There were sporadic incidents where Sikhs were assaulted, their properties vandalized, and threatening phone calls were made to Sikh institutions and individuals.[54] Unfortunately, such intercommunal tensions between adversarial groups of foreign nationals or ethnic groups in the city-state still exist in recent times. During the Indo–Pakistani conflict over Kashmir in 2019, tensions between Indians and Pakistanis in Singapore were evident but did not result in any recorded confrontations.[55] If the territorial dispute between the PRC and the Philippines over the Spratly Islands ever devolves into open violence between their respective militaries and the U.S. gets dragged in due to the U.S.–Philippines MDT, it is extremely uncertain whether the PRC expatriate community in Singapore will wind up in violent incidents against the sizeable Filipino community[56] (more than 200,000) or even U.S. nationals residing locally[57] (more than 30,000). Details about the regional scenarios in which Washington and Beijing might end up clashing are presented in the next section.

Regarding the risks of Singapore's heterogeneous ethnic Chinese population being a source of tangible vulnerability, the city-state's resident Chinese demographics are already a present reality, being the result of unfettered immigration into Singapore, especially from the late 19th century to the end of World War II, from southern China, when the former was a British Colony. A second and more significant wave of immigration across China took place from the mid-2000s to the present day as a result of immigration policies to help continue driving Singapore's economic growth. The difference between these two waves of migration lies in the way the Chinese government dealt with them. The first wave of Chinese immigrants that eventually settled in Singapore (as well as across the world) did not come from China but from the Qing Chinese Empire.[58] This distinction is important because the overseas Chinese "had no concept of belonging to a Chinese nation" until the 19th century.[59] By the 1990s, and after numerous waves of migration, scholars had identified four types of overseas Chinese across the world. Broadly speaking, the four groups are[60]

- overseas Chinese who identify with China and its development, continue to maintain political ties with China, and are a minority;
- overseas Chinese who identify as being ethnically Chinese but focused on building a new life in their host country, and are often a majority;
- overseas Chinese who participate in the politics of their host country, and contribute to nation-building efforts even if their loyalty may be questioned; and

[54] "Religious fervour that goes overboard," The New Paper, December 30, 1989, p. 10. https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/newpaper19891230-1.2.14.1?qt=sikh,%20hindu,%20gandhi,%20singapore&q=sikh%20hindu%20gandhi%20singapore

[55] Sherlyn Seah and Daryl Choo, "Kashmir conflict: Indians, Pakistanis living in S'pore worry for family, friends back home," Today, March 1, 2019. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/kashmir-border-conflict-indians-and-pakistanis-living-singapore-worry-family-and-friends

[56] "Stock estimate of overseas Filipinos," Commission on Filipinos Overseas, December 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20190623000052/https://cfo.gov.ph/images/stories/pdf/StockEstimate2013.pdf

[57] Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. relations with Singapore," U.S. Department of State, October 1, 2021. https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-singapore/

[58] Goh Sui Noi, "Being Chinese overseas," The Straits Times, July 12, 2020. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/being-chinese-overseas

[59] Ibid.

[60] Gungwu Wang, "Greater China and the Chinese overseas," The China Quarterly 136 (1993): 926–48. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231747906_Greater_China_and_the_Chinese_Overseas

- overseas Chinese who have assimilated into the nation and do not want to be identified as Chinese.

The Chinese who left China before the 1990s did not form monolithic communities with overseas Chinese people in their host countries. What this group has in common is that they came from a China that had been isolationist (late Ming dynasty and Qing Chinese Empire period), weak, and humiliated (late Qing dynasty and China under Kuomintang rule), and in a period of rebuilding (up to the 1970s). This was a time period that the PRC describes as China's "century of humiliation."[61] Those who left the shores of China during this period were regarded as having abandoned their motherland.

The second wave of Chinese immigration post-1990s was very different. They came from all parts of China and their families were shaped by the events and policies of Mao, Deng, and China's capitalist transformation. China projects confidence and progress, and positions itself as a regional power. Those who left China during this period may have done so for reasons similar to those of their brethren many decades earlier, such as displacement, economic opportunity, or privileged connections, but their attitudes were vastly different. They tended to increase the numbers that comprised the first two groups, as described earlier. They may even have pushed those who migrated earlier into the third and fourth groups, creating more tension between newcomers and established communities. In a 2022 assessment of China's diaspora policy under Xi Jinping in Germany, all Chinese nationals residing abroad, including those holding foreign citizenship, are "understood by Beijing as belonging to China… regarding all people of Chinese descent as Chinese irrespective of their nationality."[62] It appears that Beijing may be tapping into the first group of overseas Chinese to continue to identify with China. On the one hand, Beijing aims to use this group to win, or at the very least gain, influence over other groups of overseas Chinese. On the other hand, it appeals to nationalist emotions to help strengthen the motherland through activities such as intelligence gathering, technology transfer, disseminating PRC narratives, and covertly recruiting ethnic Chinese residents who could influence policies in the host country.[63] As mentioned earlier, Singapore dealt with two individuals who were part of Xi Jinping's Chinese diaspora policy. It is thus an ongoing fact that persuasive information operations toward Singapore's Chinese citizens are being conducted by Beijing, just as the island republic's population is indirectly influenced by U.S. soft power.

[61] Alison Kaufman, "The century of humiliation and China's national narratives," Testimony before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 10, 2011. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf

[62] Carsten Schäfer, "China's diaspora policy under Xi Jinping," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 9, 2022. https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022RP10/#fn-d24964e2236

[63] Ibid.

2.3 When the Dragon and Eagle Trade Blows

The potential turmoil threatening Singapore's social cohesion is real. It becomes a great concern if we turn to geostrategic scenarios involving drastic

deterioration in U.S.–China relations involving conflict and war, which would threaten Singapore's longstanding position on multi-racialism and the maintenance of an ostensibly non-aligned diplomatic posture between the Eagle and the Dragon. In drastically polarizing situations, Singapore Sampan may face the question of balancing its national interests against foreign and domestic political consequences.

The **first hypothetical scenario** involves the escalation of tension in East Asia. The PRC views Taiwan or the Republic of China (ROC) as an unfinished business from the 1949 Civil War and that the island would eventually return to the motherland. However, the use of force to achieve this goal cannot be ruled out. After a significant, socially obvious, and enduring economic recession[64] that unfortunately triggers widespread protests against high unemployment in key mainland China cities, tensions with the ROC flare after Taipei signs several agreements with Latin American and European nations to promote closer economic and social relations. With the intention of demonstrating firm leadership while guiding the population during an acute economic crisis, the Chinese President describes Taipei's latest moves as "dangerously separatist." Thus, the PRC implements a naval "quarantine" preventing the passage of all military goods to Taiwan, and ramps up flights of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF)[65] into Taiwan's airspace. In one particularly unfortunate incident, the interception of PLAAF planes by Taiwanese aircraft results in casualties. This provides the casus belli for Beijing to declare a "Legitimate National Reunification Campaign" to regain control of Taiwan. The former initiates military action against the latter's political and military command infrastructure.

Although the Taiwan Relations Act does not obligate Washington to deploy military forces to defend the ROC, there is strong bipartisan support for Taiwan in Washington, and hence, a gravely concerned U.S. President authorizes two USN carrier battlegroups to sail to the Taiwan Straits in order to persuade mainland China to revert to the pre-conflict status quo in order to prevent a further escalation of conflict. However, tragically, the events already in motion may not be stopped, as the PRC steadfastly adheres to its strategic objective of reclaiming Taiwan, since backing down might incur the loss of domestic political legitimacy. Regrettably, the Chinese military attempts to tactically dissuade the USN by launching missiles against the USN once it is within range. Unfortunately, one of these missiles manages to breach a battle group's missile defense, causing significant casualties.

At this point, it would be pertinent to conduct inferential analysis on where Singapore might eventually stand regarding the scenario about Taiwan, since crisis issues involving the ROC arguably have a more certain route to conflict given Beijing's comparatively more hardline declarative stance vis-à-vis Taiwan, versus the multilateral contestation over the SCS.

[64] "New data spells bad news for China's economy," DW News, August 16, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_jeVtfl8DM

[65] The PLAAF is the PRC's air force.

In an interview on May 8, 2023, shortly before he became Singapore's Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong sidestepped the interviewer's question about whether Singapore would enforce sanctions against the PRC if mainland China invaded Taiwan. He instead pointed out adherence to the "One China" policy where Taiwan's "de jure" or legal independence is not openly recognized, and expressed the hope that all participants in the China–Taiwan dispute be cognizant of all risks and "red lines" so that the status quo can be preserved.[66] This approach emphasizes the desire for stability between the PRC and ROC, along with the intention not to get involved in any future conflict between Beijing and Washington. It is emblematic of Singapore's foreign policy, involving the maintenance of a rules-based world system and seeking non-antagonistic outcomes in times of crisis. Beyond the official views of the island republic, a deeper analysis of Singapore–Taiwan relations is required. This would offer an educated guess to understand what would happen to Singapore Sampan if the Dragon and Eagle started to duel over Taiwan.

At first glance, Taiwan and Singapore are substantially similar, sharing southern Chinese cultural practices (the vast majority of Chinese immigrated to Singapore until the end of the 20th century from Southern China), linguistic commonality (Fujianese dialect being spoken widely among older Taiwanese and Singapore Chinese, while the youth of both states are fairly well exposed to U.S. entertainment media), and a non-socialist commercial orientation. This has led to close and friendly relations. However, ever since the 1990s, unofficial relations between Singapore and Taipei, due to the aforementioned "One China" policy, reinforced by the former's desire to benefit from the PRC's then rapidly burgeoning economy.

Despite serious bilateral trade integration between the PRC and Singapore, which supersedes Singapore–Taiwan trade, pro-Taiwan policy stances carry significant momentum during times of crisis. Even as economic sustainability is undeniably important, national/military security is of paramount national interest, and Singapore recognizes that Taipei has rendered invaluable assistance to its military. Specifically, personnel from Taiwan trained the SAF in the 1970s and 80s,[67] and the ROC allocated land for land-scarce Singapore to conduct unilateral army training from 1975 to the present.[68] This implies that a special strategic relationship exists between Taipei and Singapore that, at least on an elite leadership level, is closer than the official bilateral relationship between Beijing and Singapore.

In the event of open hostilities between the Dragon and the Eagle, Singapore's national interests may lead it to choose the "lesser of two evils," support a pro-U.S. coalition, and ride out inevitable economic punitive measures applied by the PRC on the city-state in response. This has some precedence. In one of the clearest demonstrations of the PRC's displeasure over continued Singapore–Taiwan military ties, Hong Kong port authorities

[66] Lily LaMattina, "Singapore's new prime minister says Taiwan cannot be compared to Ukraine," Taiwan News, May 16, 2024. https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/5688266

[67] Ja Ian Chong, "Singapore and Taiwan's multifaceted, unofficial ties," The News Lens, November 22, 2022. https://international.thenewslens.com/article/176948

[68] I-wei Jennifer Chang, "Taiwan's military ties to Singapore targeted by China," Global Taiwan Institute, May 6, 2020. https://globaltaiwan.org/2020/05/taiwans-military-ties-to-singapore-targeted-by-china/

in November 2016, at the behest of Beijing, seized nine armored vehicles of the Singapore Army that were previously deployed for a training exercise in Taiwan and were being returned to Singapore.[69] This soured the relationship with the city-state, and if this was intended to have been a lasting message, the island republic's leaders have quite certainly not forgotten this incident.

The **second fictional scenario** involves the escalation of conflict between the PRC and the Philippines in the SCS. China claims all of the SCS, even based on historical and maritime archaeological arguments, where ancient Chinese maps and shipwrecks have been used as proof to claim Chinese historic passage and the use of the seas by Chinese mariners since time immemorial.[70] In modern times, parts of the SCS are also occupied by the overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of nations such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In particular, the Philippines is currently enforcing claims using the islands and reefs in its EEZ as bases and outposts. It has recently become the target of the PRC Coast Guard, which has employed aggressive tactics on the Filippino Coast Guard Forces,[71] even as the latter were carrying out legitimate duties in the Philippines' EEZ[72] off the West Philippine Sea (WPS).[73]

Because of recent events, the sitting Filippino President is under increasing pressure to be more assertive against the PRC Coast Guard. Consequently, he feels compelled to authorize the deployment of the most capable vessels of the Philippine Navy to these contested seas to escort their lesser armed/unarmed coast guards or chartered civilian vessels. He is also well aware that there exists a treaty that would compel the U.S. to defend his country in times of war. This scenario may lead the Dragon into a duel against the Eagle over the SCS.

Unfortunately, Beijing is determined to reinforce its claims to the SCS or WPS to secure its bountiful oil and natural gas reserves, ensure its industrial and economic development, and hedge against possible economic stagnation. Using Chinese historical arguments would make it even more difficult for China to back down from any incident as it would be seen by its citizens as a loss of pride, reminding them of what China experienced in its "century of humiliation." The regrettable cycle of escalation continues, culminating in a standoff near a disputed reef where heated emotions overcome attempts at de-escalation. A physical encounter between a PRC Coast Guard vessel and a Philippine Navy patrol vessel results in significant damage on both sides and loss of life.

This crosses a red line that neither side can politically tolerate and starts to fuel patriotic emotions at home. The President of the Philippines activates the U.S.–Philippines MDT, which assures that "an armed attack on the Philippines armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China Sea

[69] Ibid.

[70] "'Historical records 100 percent support China's claims in the South China Sea,' says British scholar," Global Times, April 16, 2024. https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202404/1310685.shtml

[71] Agence France-Presse, "Chinese sailors wield knives, axe in disputed Sea clash with Philippines," Voice of America, June 20, 2024. https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-sailors-wield-knives-axe-in-disputed-sea-clash-with-philippines-/7663194.html

[72] According to the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea, a state's EEZ extends 200 nautical miles from its coastline, where it has exclusive rights to all economic resources.

[73] The WPS is referred to as the South China Sea by other nations. China claims most of the WPS as its sovereign waters, despite such a claim being debunked by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in 2016.

would invoke U.S. mutual defense commitments."[74] This triggers a response in the form of a USN task force supplemented by two Marine Expeditionary Units[75] to the SCS and WPS territories controlled by Manila, originally as a show of force and solidarity with its ally. However, even as tensions appear to stabilize in the days that follow, patriotic voices start to drown out other calls for calm and de-escalation. To make a point, a portion of China's fishing militia fleet sail dangerously close to the USN task force. The crisis takes an inexplicable turn for the worse when warning shots appear to damage and injure several militia fleet crew members. The garrison force at a nearby PRC-controlled island monitoring radio waves feel that they have to intervene and launch a missile against U.S. logistics based on Filippino soil. Consequently, significant casualties are reported among U.S. service personnel and Filippino civilian employees working at the base.

Both of the aforementioned scenarios are fictional, but are based on the experience of past events and likely trajectories if future events enter into an unrecoverable tailspin. Such realities are possible, as follows: The events leading to a possible uncontrollable escalation of hostilities are beginning to be seen in i) the increasing PRC military presence in the areas around Taiwan, ii) more belligerent Chinese actions against the Philippines in the SCS/WPS, and iii) an economic outlook for mainland China that may force it to divert its citizens' attention elsewhere to preserve the CPC's power. Instances of economic degradation leading to authoritarian regimes resorting to military adventurism to distract an increasingly disaffected local population have occurred repeatedly in the past. One particularly prominent case was Argentinian dictator Leopoldo Galtieri, who invaded the British Falkland Islands in April 1982 to rally nationalistic sentiment among Argentinians in the face of a failing economy. The applicability of such a scenario to CPC cannot be ruled out conclusively.

The commonality between these scenarios is that the U.S. is unavoidably involved due to treaty obligations[76] and suffers sudden losses because the sitting White House administration comes under overwhelming bipartisan pressure from both the U.S. Congress and the Senate to act. It does so by first marshaling backing from allies, leading to the formation of a supportive coalition that may include appealing to states that are still "fence-sitting." As mentioned earlier, the U.S. has the option of using coercive levers, such as the denial of military hardware/software exports to Singapore, along with rescinding military training agreements, which would seriously handicap the island's defense capabilities. These levers may offer Singapore very little room for maneuvering. Simultaneously, China would surely try to sway Singapore away from U.S. influence by using economic levers—the proverbial carrot and stick. How the city-state might respond and any hypothetical domestic or foreign outcomes are explored in Part 3 of this paper.

[74] Sebastian Strangio, "Kamala Harris says US commitment to Philippines 'unwavering'," The Diplomat, November 22, 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/kamala-harris-says-us-commitment-to-philippines-unwavering/

[75] A Marine Expeditionary Unit is an expeditionary United States Marine Corps battalion reinforced with aviation and logistics units. It comprises 2,200–4,400 personnel.

[76] There is precedent to support such scenarios, as it was treaty obligations that turned the assassination of the Archduke of Austria–Hungary into the First World War.

When viewed through the lens of international relations, the risk of a China–Taiwan or China–Philippines crisis, which subsequently escalates uncontrollably into a U.S.–China conflict because of treaty obligations, is nonzero and concretely probable. Such contingencies should not be dismissed, and Singapore's security planners must actively consider such scenarios. Washington may even seek to avoid combat involvement as it struggles under the obligations of the Taiwan Relations Act or the U.S.–Philippines MDT. It is worth noting that World War I started with a political assassination that triggered the activation of numerous interlinked defensive treaties, drawing most European nations into a bloody four-year war. If one death precipitates World War II, numerous politically significant fatalities will certainly activate the ironclad clauses of defensive treaties, making an Asia Pacific conflict likely.

III. Singapore's Stand in a U.S.–China War Scenario

3.1 The Geopolitical Nightmare Has Come to Pass, What Now?

A state of war between a regional Great Power and an extra-regional superpower catches Singapore between the proverbial "rock and a hard place." To begin with, analyzing Washington's coercive potential in the military security realm should induce a fair amount of caution among the island state's defense planners. From a cursory examination of the SAF's equipment holdings, the following weapons/equipment are U.S.-made (Table 2), requiring regular supplies of U.S. spare parts for maintenance, without which they will be significantly handicapped or become inactive. More technically advanced equipment, such as aircraft, might require software upgrades and passwords supplied by their U.S. manufacturers to remain up-to-date or even be used, respectively.

Table 2. U.S.-made SAF equipment holdings

EQUIPMENT DESIGNATION/NAME	MILITARY BRANCH DEPLOYED	OPERATIONAL PURPOSE
Mk 44 Bushmaster II 30mm and M242 Bushmaster 25mm Automatic Cannons	Army	Chief armament for armored troop transport vehicles
Various diesel engines from Detroit Diesel, Caterpillar Inc., and Cummins.	Army	Engines for all the Army's self-propelled artillery and the majority of the Army's armored troop transports, amphibious armored vehicles, and Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles
M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System	Army	Singapore's sole self-propelled Multiple Launch Rocket System
XM395 Precision Guided 120mm Mortar Munition	Army	The only GPS-guided mortar shell in the Army's inventory
AN/TPQ-53, AN/TPQ-36 & AN/TPQ-37 radars	Army	Radars for locating enemy artillery forming a substantial quantity of the Army's capability
F-15E Strike Eagle	Air Force	Air Superiority and Deep Strike fighter jet
F-16 Fighting Falcon	Air Force	Multi-Role Combat Jet
F-35 Lightning II	Air Force	Multi-Role Stealth Jet
Gulfstream G550	Air Force	U.S. business jet fitted with Israeli Airborne Early Warning & Control radar

KC-130 & C-130 Hercules	Air Force	The former is an aerial refueling tanker & the latter is a transport aircraft (large chunks of the Air Force's tanker and transport fleets)
AH-64 Apache	Air Force	Sole attack helicopter
CH-47 Chinook	Air Force	Heavy lift transport helicopter
SH-60 Seahawk	Air Force	Anti-Submarine Warfare helicopter (the AH-64, CH-47 and SH-60 comprise the majority of the helicopter fleet)
AIM-120 AMRAAM, AIM-9 Sidewinder and AIM-7 Sparrow	Air Force	Medium ranged Air-to Air Missile (AAM), short-ranged AAM and older model medium-ranged AAM, respectively. These are the majority of the Air Force's AAM stocks.
Paveway II	Air Force	Freefall laser-guided bomb (U.S. is the sole supplier of such munitions for Singapore)
Joint Direct Attack Munition	Air Force	GPS guided freefall bomb (U.S. is the sole supplier of such munitions for Singapore)
AGM-65 Maverick Missile	Air Force	Guided air-launched, rocket-powered, multi-purpose surface attack missile
BGM-71 & AGM-114 Missiles	Air Force	Guided helicopter launched anti-tank missiles
CH-47 Chinook	Air Force	Heavy lift transport helicopter
AGM-154 Joint Standoff Weapon	Air Force	Long range air launched guided glide bombhelicopter fleet)
AGM-84 Harpoon	Air Force and Navy	Only jet guided anti-ship missile in the Air Force's and Navy's inventory
Lockheed Martin AN/FPS-117	Air Force	One of only two advanced Air Search & Defense radars acquired by the RSAF

Due to Singapore's miniscule size and smaller population vis-à-vis its putative adversaries, the SAF's planners have decided that the city-state's military defense strategy must be grounded in diplomacy and deterrence to prevent war; however, if the latter were unavoidable, a swift and decisive victory must be the priority.[77] While it is debatable which of SAF's air, land, or sea branches is most responsible for deterrence or achieving an expeditious victory, the U.S. military embargo would seriously hobble the city-state's military doctrine.

Specifically, the Army's mechanized or armored infantry units[78] would find it much harder to outmaneuver and defeat the enemy if the worn-out U.S.-made engines of their armored troop vehicles could not be overhauled, and/or the automatic cannons arming these vehicles are rendered inoperable due to a lack of spare parts for maintenance. Moreover, the ground forces of

[77] Singapore Ministry of Defense. https://www.mindef.gov.sg/home

[78] Mechanized or armored infantry are ground troops transported in vehicles to and from the battlefield so as to maximize tactical mobility, thus covering more area/distance.

the city-state depend on U.S. approval for shipments of rocket launcher spare parts, rocket munitions, precision-guided mortar shells, and radar components to track adversary artillery. If deterrence should prove ephemeral, such arms are essential for accurate long- and short-range strikes on critical targets, whereas radars are vital for suppressing enemy artillery so that Singapore's forces can be preserved.

Next, the Air Force depends on U.S.-made equipment for a lion's share of its hardware. As shown in Table 2, the RSAF's multi-role combat aircraft, early warning radar-equipped jets, aerial refueling and transport aircraft, and attack and anti-submarine warfare helicopters, together with much of the heavy lift helicopter fleet of the RSAF, were purchased from the U.S.

Additionally, the absolute majority of the Air Force's precision-guided missiles and bombs for targets in the air, on land, and at sea are U.S. products. The U.S. is one of the only two nations (along with Israel) that supplies advanced ground-based air defense radars to Singapore. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the defense of the island republic's airspace, as well as the operational effectiveness of Singapore's Army and Navy as an outcome of being enhanced through timely air support from the RSAF, to say nothing of the latter's autonomous strike capability on strategic targets, depends on good relations with Washington.

Finally, an examination of the Republic of Singapore Navy's (RSN) hardware holdings reveals that it is perhaps the least vulnerable to the deprivation of U.S. spare parts and weapons. Indeed, the only major weapon or system that the RSN bought from the U.S. was the AGM-84 Harpoon anti-ship missile. However, the harpoon missile is the only weapon available to the RSN to prosecute enemy vessels beyond the visual range. While the Navy could purchase a competing model of anti-ship missiles from another nation that would be compatible with the RSN's European-designed or built ships and submarines, deliveries of this replacement missile would take time and require training for personnel to build operational competence with this new missile. The result of U.S. equipment sanctions is also a window of acute vulnerability from when the last Harpoon is fired to when the first RSN vessel is operationally certified on replacement missiles.

An indirect concern is that all the Navy's ships, submarines, Western weapons, and supporting systems are either built or designed by states that are either allied with or susceptible to Washington's influence, such as NATO members and Israel. If the former so desired, it could pressure the latter to withhold naval equipment exports and software upgrades from Singapore. Consequently, the RSN's ability to deter maritime adventurism from adversary states, secure the island republic's Sea Lanes of Communications, and support amphibious operations by the Army would definitely be jeopardized.

Having clarified that military material deprivation would have a debilitating effect on Singapore's deterrence potential, and the ability to prevent a drawn-out war should violence be unavoidable, it is also worth reiterating that downgraded Singapore–U.S. ties would preclude training of the SAF by the U.S. military and scupper future exercises with the latter. For the city-state's military, this inability to benchmark itself against the military of a supportive superpower would stymie operational readiness. It would hence be exceedingly difficult for Singapore to turn down Washington if a "with us or against us" ultimatum was ever issued. However, it is prudent to analyze Beijing's likely coercive economic influence on the former to holistically infer the island republic's decisions in such a strategically tense situation.

Examining the risk of Washington severing military ties with Singapore requires the creation of educated guesses and assumptions. For reasons that are covered in the next section, it is unlikely that the city-state will side with Beijing; therefore, the SAF will not be completely deprived of its US-supplied defense capabilities. However, the extent to which Washington will support or facilitate the island republic's military security will depend on the practical and political backing Singapore gives America in a U.S.–China conflict. Full and open backing from the former to the latter will, of course, preserve the status quo in military partnerships with the U.S., while partial or reserved backing either on the political or actionable/material front might mean withholding spare parts for certain weapon systems, denial of upgrading already possessed equipment, canceling approvals for arms purchases, and other painful but not crippling penalties.

3.2 Singapore–China and Singapore–U.S. Economic Ties in Times of Strife?

If Singapore were induced to support a pro-U.S. coalition due to the city-state's reliance on Washington's military-based support, it would be remiss of Beijing to not attempt to convince the island republic's leadership to reverse the course and maintain some form of nominal non-alignment akin to Singapore's pre-conflict political stance, thus rebuffing the Americans to some extent.

Based on the previous analyses in Parts 1 and 2, this can be achieved chiefly via economic methods. First, the PRC has a very significant economic relationship with Singapore, which is true in absolute terms. According to the latest statistics for 2023, Singapore–China bilateral trade amounted to US$124.42 billion[79] of which Chinese exports totaled US$76.95 billion,[80] and the corresponding aggregate Singaporean exports were valued at US$47.47 billion. This compares realistically with the trade statistics from 2022 where the city-state exported US$53.1 billion to the PRC and the latter exported US$50.8 billion in return.[81] Referencing foreign investment, the

[79] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023," Department of Statistics Singapore. https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade

[80] "China exports to Singapore," Trading Economics, 2024. https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/singapore

[81] "Singapore (SGP) and China (CHN) trade," The Observatory of Economic Complexity. https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/sgp/partner/chn

balance changes as mainland China's accumulated direct investment as of 2022 amounted to US$6.3 billion[82] versus aggregate Singapore investment into the PRC of US$179.41 billion by the same year, as mentioned in Part 1 of this paper.

If the PRC decides to express displeasure over Singapore taking Washington's side or even appearing to exhibit pro-U.S. favoritism in any U.S.–China conflict, the city-state's leaders should be cognizant of the economic pressure levers that China could apply. In terms of impact, two of the most implementable would be trade restrictions amounting to de facto sanctions such as high tariffs on Singapore's products/services and even boycotts of Singapore's exports. Taking the average of the figures from 2023 and 2022 mentioned above, it would, at worst, lead to a trade revenue reduction of approximately US$50 billion that year. As for imports from China, the island republic buys significant quantities of valuable capital products such as broadcasting equipment, computers, office machine parts, and even merchant ships along with essential commodities such as refined petroleum.[83] Finding alternative national suppliers for these imports would take time, and a decision by Beijing to limit/prohibit exports to Singapore would inhibit the productivity of the latter's economy since an annual average of about US$63 billion (average of previously quoted import values from 2022 and 2023) is imported from China. Such action is not inconceivable since the PRC has implemented such "self-limiting" trade decisions before.[84] In terms of trade, a coercive power imbalance favors Beijing. While China is Singapore's most valued trading partner,[85] Singapore is the PRC's 16th largest trading partner,[86] based on data from 2023. This gives Beijing the option to implement trade sanctions against Singapore without any significant economic harm.

Turning to foreign investment, this provides an avenue for eroding Singapore's gross national product, part of which includes yields and returns from Singapore's investments overseas. As stated earlier, the city-state invested US$179.41 billion into China while only receiving US$6.3 billion in Chinese investment as of 2022. Hypothetically, Singapore's investment holdings in the PRC could be nationalized or confiscated as a punitive measure. If the island republic adopted a retaliatory approach with Chinese investment in Singapore, the appropriated assets would not be sufficient to compensate for the city-state's seized assets.

On a purely quantitative basis, the economic pain inflicted on Singapore's economy, if Beijing decides to use trade and investment as an economic stick to penalize Singapore's foreign policy decisions, makes a convincing argument against supporting the U.S. However, further analysis reveals a more complicated strategic picture that could lead to choosing the proverbial "lesser of two evils." Examining Singapore's trade statistics for 2023 reveals that, while China is the former's largest trading partner, the U.S.

[82] Arendse Huld, "The rise of Chinese capital: Impact on ASEAN's manufacturing landscape," ASEAN Briefing, November 21, 2023.https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/the-rise-of-chinese-capital-impact-on-aseans-manufacturing-landscape/

[83] "Singapore (SGP) and China (CHN) trade," The Observatory of Economic Complexity. https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/sgp/partner/chn

[84] Gatra Priyandita, "Chinese economic coercion in Southeast Asia: Balancing carrots and sticks, Hybrid CoE Working Papers," The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, October 2023, pp. 1–31, 16.

[85] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023," Department of Statistics Singapore. https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade

[86] "National data," National Bureau of Statistics of China, January 12, 2024. http://guangzhou.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxxgk/2799825/302274/302275/5624373/index.html

is the second largest with US$96.19 billion.[87] Even though drastic disruptions to 13.85% of the island republic's total trade (Singapore–China trade as a percentage of total foreign trade amounting to about US$908.67 billion) could trigger a recession, rebuffing, or even give an angry Washington a lukewarm response, it might not be a smart move because the rest of the city-state's major trading partners include U.S. allies such as the European Union (US$78.46 billion), South Korea (US$46.34 billion), and Japan (US$40.53 billion), who can be pressured into economically ostracizing a Singapore that has chosen to "cast its lot" with an adversary of the U.S.[88]

Turning to foreign investment, the U.S. has much greater sway over Singapore than China does. With over US$244 billion cumulatively invested in Singapore as of 2019,[89] the local business community and, by extension, the Singapore Government cannot afford to (figuratively and literally) offend Washington. As for the existence of any debt hesitancy to offend Beijing, Singapore does not owe China any debts, and hence, there is no "debt trap diplomacy" on which the PRC can lean. Additionally, the city-state is not part of the Belt and Road Initiative and has not accepted any Chinese loans or grants to build infrastructure. Thus, Beijing has no financial obligation that could hinder its geostrategic autonomy.

Even without considering the weighty U.S. contribution to Singapore's national security and the facilitation of its strongly proactive military doctrine, the city-state is quite likely to bite the proverbial bullet and bear the economic consequences of a China that may feel that it has been offended either when Singapore appears to be supporting a pro-U.S. coalition or maintaining its position of multi-racialism while supporting a rules-based order. If the U.S. supplied arms, equipment, training, and knowledge transfers were factored into Singapore's political considerations, the eventual geopolitical decision would be even clearer.

Singapore is likely to support a pro-U.S. coalition in some practical or actionable terms, especially if the coalition's efforts resonate with Singapore's foreign policy. It can be posited that the risk of the PRC economic penalties outlined in the earlier paragraphs is very high or almost certain. However, depending on Singapore's political support for the aforementioned Washington-led coalition, Beijing might offer the island republic the chance to recover the latter's foreign investments or be compensated for their nationalization, in order to tempt the city-state to weaken its coalition contributions.

3.3 Fighting the Narrative War

There is an oft-quoted saying by Lord Palmerston, the British Prime Minister

[87] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023," Department of Statistics Singapore. https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade

[88] Singapore's bilateral trade with Hong Kong (about US$53 billion) strengthens China's coercive hand as the PRC controls Hong Kong. However, further research from https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/sgp/partner/hkg reveals that the majority of imports from the latter consists of gold, precious metals, and jewelry, which are luxury products that are not economically vital, and hence, easily substitutable or sourced elsewhere. Conversely, the lion's share of exports to Hong Kong are integrated circuits, which are a valuable industrial product which is readily saleable to alternative markets should the CPC direct Hong Kong to boycott Singaporean products. For these reasons, Hong Kong will not be considered in this paper's analysis.

[89] Danielle Issac, "Foreign direct investments from the US to Singapore hit over $244b," Singapore Business Review, 2019. https://sbr.com.sg/economy/exclusive/foreign-direct-investments-us-singapore-hit-over-244b

from 1855–1858 and 1859–1865, that "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."[90] If Singapore ever decides to, in its own way, support the U.S. in any U.S.–China conflict, it is because it is in its calculated national interest to do so. Be that as it may, it is almost certain that Beijing will not put itself in Singapore's proverbial shoes to understand why the latter has decided to align closer with Washington. Instead, as earlier mentioned, the PRC is quite likely to react with righteous indignation that a "Chinese Country" peopled by the Chinese diaspora, which should rightly owe allegiance to the concept of a "Greater China," has inconceivably decided to "betray" the former in favor of a foreign Western enemy (in this case America). Thus, the city-state may need to be humbled in order to teach it to "know its place."

Other than the weighty economic penalties mentioned in the previous section, there is most certainly going to be official, semi-official, and/or Beijing-sanctioned but ostensibly unofficial condemnation of Singapore's decision and its leadership. Official censuring of the city-state's foreign policy not to turn down the U.S. could be issued by the PRC's foreign ministry along the lines of the former making a "grave mistake," which would ultimately "jeopardize its long-term interests." Such measured criticism might grow in intensity when CPC-controlled media/news outlets such as the China Global Television Network and Xinhua News Agency air or carry current affairs reports and editorials denouncing the Singapore government for aiding the American Eagle. Possible examples of such strongly disparaging and even subtly threatening content are as follows:[91]

- "The island republic has no business in this conflict, and thus has no moral right to take sides against China."
- "Singapore is a very small country, thus opposing a Great Power like the PRC would be foolish."
- "China has a long memory. Are Singapore's leaders sure that they want to walk down this treacherous path?"

If messaging was not sufficiently clear, ultra-nationalist bloggers or social media influencers could be given official carte blanche to castigate Singapore's leadership. Indeed, this was done previously when Lu Qi, a PRC nationalist scholar labelled Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew a hanjian or traitor to the Chinese Nation because Lee deemphasized a Chinese "national" or cultural identity for Singapore's Chinese diaspora,[92] thereby weakening the influence that Beijing had over Singapore. In the same vein, other mainland Chinese nationalists have labeled Lee as an "opportunist" who exploited both the PRC and U.S. for his own ends. If Lee could be lambasted for his domestic and foreign policies during peacetime, an incensed Beijing would most certainly endorse the far harsher castigation of the city-state's sitting prime minister during wartime.

[90] Susan Ratcliffe (Ed.), "Oxford Essential Quotations (4th Edition)," Oxford University Press, 2016. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00008130

[91] The first two comments are paraphrased narratives that mainland China has previously expressed about Singapore. The third comment is derived from the content of an article written by former Singaporean Ambassador, Bilahari Kausikan in The Straits Times on May 30, 2019. All three are sourced from Mr Kausikan's book, Singapore Is Still Not an Island, Straits Times Press, 2023, pp. 154, 258.

[92] Rachel Lu, "Was Lee Kuan Yew an inspiration or a race traitor? Chinese can't agree," China File, March 25, 2015. https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/media/was-lee-kuan-yew-inspiration-or-race-traitor-chinese-cant-agree

However, criticism, no matter how virulent it is, does not accomplish anything to hurt Singapore or change the policies of its leaders. Indeed, it is widely understood that sovereign states, to say nothing of Great Powers such as the PRC, would surely enunciate opposition to the external policies that counter their national objectives. Instead, the Chinese opposition to Singapore's support for the U.S. would be directed at Singapore voters who are predisposed toward China due to cultural, socio-political, and even linguistic affinities. The idea is to communicate with such a voting bloc and impart ideas, such as

- the government of the day is acting against the interests of the "Greater Chinese People" (of whom the CPC claims to be the legitimate government);
- Beijing will refuse to work with such an adversarial government; and
- since the CPC will continue to govern the PRC whatever the outcome of the U.S.–China conflict, while U.S. policies change with subsequent administrations, Singaporeans should pressure their government to change course, or vote more China-friendly government in the next elections, so as to restore Singapore–China relations to "what it should and used to be."

Such a strategy to meddle in the internal politics of a sovereign state is not new to mainland China's foreign affairs playbook. A good example of this was during the 2018 Malaysian general elections when the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia openly campaigned for the President of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), an ethnic Chinese political party that was then part of Malaysia's ruling National Front or Barisan Nasional coalition.[93] That the MCA president subsequently lost his parliamentary seat is beside the point, since the PRC ambassador's behavior was forbidden under Article 41 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of non-interference by diplomats in the internal affairs of their host countries.[94] Furthermore, in 2015, the previous mainland Chinese ambassador said, in relation to the potential anti-ethnic Chinese mob violence in Malaysia, that the PRC would take action against members of the Chinese diaspora. This was accompanied by a speech days later where he emphasized that all foreigners of Chinese ethnicity were free to regard the PRC as "their home."[95] Taken holistically, the CPC's track record indicates that it is likely to regard ethnic Chinese Asians as falling under its influence or even moral authority, which negatively affects Singapore's decision-making autonomy and sovereignty.

Actual PRC nationals present in Singapore during a U.S.–China war, where Singapore supports, or even appears to support, a pro-Washington coalition in the eyes of the Chinese Dragon, is a serious concern. As covered in Part 2 of this paper, this group is quite large and is estimated to be hundreds of thousands. Taking an estimate of approximately 500,000 mainland Chinese citizens present in Singapore, and factoring in the "rally 'round the flag effect," where citizens of a nation naturally support the state and its leaders

[93] Bilahari Kausikan, "Singapore is still not an island," Straits Times Press, 2023, pp. 142–143.

[94] "Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations," United Nations, 1961, p. 13. https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf

[95] Bilahari Kausikan, "Singapore is still not an island," Straits Times Press, 2023, p. 143.

when at war,[96] creates a truly worrying potential threat.

Regardless of the efficacy of CPC propaganda to inspire loyalty to the PRC, and with no means to actually gauge how patriotic mainland Chinese nationals in Singapore really are, it would be prudent for Singapore security planners to assume that the "rally 'round the flag effect" for PRC citizens when hostilities against the U.S. have commenced would lead to at least a proportion of PRC residents in Singapore being willing to undertake activities against Singapore (since it is supporting the U.S.) and the U.S. presence in the island republic. Even with a conservative estimate that only 10% of mainland Chinese citizens in Singapore are willing to bid for the CPC, this still gives rise to a worrying pool of 50,000 adversary agents who might do the following:

- Attempt a general strike or cause serious labor disruptions. Mainland Chinese citizens are employed in a wide range of blue and white-collar professions. They have a concerning ability to disrupt or even temporarily cripple business operations.
- Cause mass social disturbance. This possibility was mentioned earlier in Part 2, where the spectrum of violence against the sizeable Filippino or significant U.S. community is mentioned. What was not said was the inevitable harsh and strict police actions that would inevitably follow, somewhere shattering Singapore's peaceful image.
- Sabotaging infrastructure and facilities. As explained above, PRC citizens are involved in a wide variety of industries, including managerial, rank, and file staff. In the initial phases of a U.S.–China war, such individuals could sabotage Singaporean infrastructure/facilities to hinder the city-state's ability to support the U.S. or punish the former's government for daring to go against the "Greater Chinese Nation." A sobering thought is that such saboteurs might even be naturalized Singapore citizens who were born in China and remained loyal to the PRC, despite years of living in Singapore.
- Espionage of U.S. military operations in Singapore. The island republishes U.S. aircraft, warships, and even a USN logistics base. During wartime, U.S. military operations in Singapore would surely increase exponentially, and it would be remiss for Beijing not to appeal to PRC citizens to spy on U.S. military movements in Singapore. Such espionage operations are expected until they are firmly dealt with by Singapore and U.S. counterspying efforts.

While influence operations to convert Singapore voters toward pro-mainland Chinese viewpoints are a medium- to long-term affair, the disruptive, destructive, and espionage-based actions of the nationalist CPC supporting local PRC nationals are an immediate concern, especially when Singapore is further drawn into the vortex of conflict between the metaphorical Dragon and Eagle.

[96] Joshua Goldstein and Jon Pevenhouse, "International Relations (8th Edition)," Pearson Longman (New York), 2008.

Based on this paper's analysis thus far, Singapore's national interest justifies the decision to join or support a U.S.-helmed coalition that would place the city-state near a certain risk of being subjected to a PRC-launched manipulative informational campaign targeting local voters. Unfortunately, the risk that such a campaign will actually achieve any pro-Beijing political or electoral objective is unpredictable and unknown. Concerning the risk of CPC-instigated disruption, sabotage, and/or espionage activities on Singapore soil, an educated guess would reckon that espionage is almost certain to occur given its direct non-destructive nature. However, the extent to which Chinese covert agents will foment economic/social disruption and sabotage operations will inversely depend on the priority that the PRC places on normalizing Singapore–China relations after the conclusion of U.S.–China hostilities.

3.4 What Can or Should Singapore Do?

To maintain decisional autonomy in its foreign policy, Singapore should diversify its military equipment suppliers and national security facilitators while broadening its trade and investment partners to avoid being beholden to any particular Great Power or superpower. This is sound advice in theory but does not play out well in practice.

All decisions are compromised when building military capabilities. Singapore could, in principle, diversify its sources of military hardware across several national manufacturers, but this would substantially raise the costs of the defense capabilities that the island's republic desires to maintain. The reason for this is the lack of economies of scale from concentrating defense acquisitions on one or a few select companies from one nation (e.g., the U.S.) to regional state grouping (e.g., the European Union). Buying a critical mass of equipment from a unitary source allows Singapore to negotiate better prices, terms, and conditions such as technology transfer, which would not be offered with smaller piecemeal acquisitions. The city-state has already spent a hefty US$15 billion on the military for 2024[97] (For context, Türkiye had a comparable US$15.8 billion budget in 2023[98]). Further increases owing to inefficiencies in hardware acquisition would be contentious. Additionally, defense imports from diversified sources would make logistical coordination for SAF far more challenging than it needs to be, thereby eroding military operational readiness, especially if any one supplier suffers manufacturing or shipping delays.

Next, the quality and reputation of the armaments are issues. With military security as the lynchpin behind territorial integrity and sovereignty, Singapore cannot afford to have potential adversaries cast aspersions on SAF equipment, which would weaken the deterrence projection. The SAF must employ high-grade arms backed by excellent maintenance and upgrading

[97] "Singapore sets USD15 billion defence budget for 2024," Janes, February 19, 2024. https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/industry/singapore-sets-usd15-billion-defence-budget-for-2024

[98] Nan Tian, Diego Lopes Da Silva, Xiao Liang, and Lorenzo Scarazzato, "Trends in world military expenditure, 2023," SIPRI, April 2024. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf#page=2

agreements. The largest arms exporters by revenue are the U.S., France, Russia, China, and Germany, ranked in decreasing order,[99] and the island republic cannot consider Russia (due to international sanctions and poor equipment performance in Ukraine) and China (concerns about quality[100] and vulnerability to Chinese geopolitical leverage) as defense suppliers; Washington, Paris, and Berlin are already major arms purveyors to Singapore. Hence, factoring in the reputation and established quality of U.S. and European weapons, along with the need for economies of scale with manageable logistics, it is perhaps unavoidable that the U.S., and to a lesser extent, the European Union, will have military supply leverage over Singapore.

Examining economic considerations, other than mainland China, the other fourth largest bilateral trading partners by gross trading revenue (in Singapore Dollars) are as shown below:[101]

- 2nd United States (S$129.1 billion)
- 3rd Malaysia (S$123.6 billion)
- 4th EU (S$105.3 billion)
- 5th Taiwan (S$92.9 billion)

Thus, Singapore's key trading partners consist of developed economies and its closest immediate neighbor, Malaysia, which is a fellow ASEAN member that Singapore depends on for essential imports, such as food products. Hence, Singapore already has an economically ideal mix of trading partners, and it is counterproductive and inefficient to seek further trade diversification. For better or worse, the city-state's trade vulnerability to external coercion is unavoidable.

Parsing the island's major foreign investors, the top three foreign investors are the U.S., Japan, and the United Kingdom—developed economies and leaders of the Global West, on which Singapore's economy depends for investments in corporate finance and equities, the wholesale/retail sector, and manufacturing industries.[102] Realistically, a policy that broadens foreign investment donors to lessen the influence of vulnerability yields limited utility. The list of affluent countries with surplus funds to invest externally is short, and if Singapore has to potentially support the national interests of key foreign investors to maintain cordial economic relations, it would be preferable if the latter states were members of a rule-based liberal international order that abides by UN conventions, resolutions, and essential principles.

Having established that it is both difficult and impractical to mitigate Singapore's military and economic vulnerability to external pressures, the remaining option is to reinforce domestic resilience to mainland Chinese propaganda and persuasive informational operations. Returning to the analysis from Part 2, where the work of Benedict Anderson referring to national

[99] Katharina Buchholz, "The world's biggest arms exporters," Statista, March 13, 2024. https://www.statista.com/chart/18417/global-weapons-exports/

[100] "China's arms exports face sharp decline due to defective quality, unreliable performance: Analysts," The Times of India, September 13, 2023. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/chinas-arms-exports-face-sharp-decline-due-to-defective-quality-unreliable-performance-analysts/articleshow/103619727.cms

[101] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023," Department of Statistics Singapore. https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade

[102] "Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Singapore," Lloyds Bank, July 2024. https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/singapore/investment

identity being socially constructed and emotionally sustained within the common consciousness of the people was discussed, the challenge is to ascertain how Singapore can create a localized national identity that can achieve subscription or "buy in" from an absolute majority of Singaporean voters, along with at least a simple majority of ethnic Chinese Singaporeans.

Such an identity or sense of nationalistic belonging can be rooted in any number of factors, including common language (i.e., Singlish or Singapore English, which is the English patois spoken by all local-born or raised residents), cuisine, an abstract sense of belonging to the territory of Singapore, or even values such as multiculturalism, common moral ethics codes, and the belief that Singapore has value and must be fought for. In essence, this majority-supported national identity serves as an effective bulwark against Beijing's persuasive or directional propaganda because it unambiguously establishes the following:

- Singaporeans are our own people, even if ethnic Chinese do not belong in a "Greater China."
- Singapore implements policies that serve its own national interests, even if the Great Powers (such as the PRC) find them objectional.
- The city-state will manage its international relations and stances toward regional/global disputes according to its strategy for survival and progress. The CPC does not get to dictate our policies.

Unfortunately, the common English saying "easier said than done" applies to any endeavor to build an enduring national identity, taking much time and well thought out/carefully implemented social policy.
More resources should be invested in areas such as heritage education and the promotion of successful local sports personalities, along with other areas that contribute to strengthening the fabric of society. Such a national project is a long-term effort and regrettably leaves Singapore vulnerable in the short- to medium-term, as it usually takes one or two generations for shifts in national identity to take place. Such a process cannot be rushed but should be encouraged at the very least.

Finally, the issue of PRC nationals present in Singapore after the U.S.–China hostilities commenced is perhaps the least civil or cordial to address. Indeed, any strike action/labor unrest, violence, sabotage, or spying carried out by this group will most probably be harshly dealt with by the island republic's police and even specially trained military units enforcing Singapore's infamously strict laws. A possible permanent solution is for this community to be sent back en masse to China in return for the compulsory wholesale repatriation of all foreigners present on Chinese soil or PRC-controlled territories at that time. There is historical precedence for this in that civilian exchange programs were previously conducted during wartime, when civilians caught on the wrong side of the border were safely repatriated to their home countries. In this case, PRC citizens can be assured

that there is a way back home, while foreigners in China also desire to return to their city-state.

IV. Conclusion

For many reasons, Singapore is fortunate. Simply put, its geostrategic position as an indispensable international port, the unstinting hard work of its population, the wise economic and foreign policies of its government, and the geopolitical outcomes in Asia writ-large, which have so far precluded a major war since the 1980s, have allowed the small island's republic to thrive.

However, as the analysis in this paper has shown, Singapore's sustainability becomes contentious once the two most significant powers in Asia, the U.S. and PRC, are drawn into a prolonged period of tension that may escalate to open conflict. In this scenario, the city-state does not want to countenance as it challenges Singapore's successful and long-standing position on multi-racialism and respect for a rules-based order, putting the city-state in a difficult position where it may have to choose a different way forward. Washington's preponderant influence over Singapore, as its chief arms supplier and military readiness facilitator, along with the U.S.'s position as Singapore's top foreign investor and second-largest trading partner, leads to the deduction that the island republic may have to choose to bear the painful loss of very substantial trade with, and sizeable accumulated investments in, the PRC. In this case, the preservation of military/national security is worthy of the high likelihood of a serious economic recession. Such cold calculus in service of the national interest during a crisis would be an unenviable task for the sitting Singapore government.

Even if the relationship between the U.S. and the PRC settles into a persistent tension like that of the Cold War, the city-state's leaders would still have to grapple with the potential shift in public support from ethnic Chinese voters who hold favorable views about Beijing for linguistic, cultural, or other sociopolitical reasons. It is a foregone conclusion that the CPC would try to get such a voting bloc on its side using influence operations. The city-state has been governed by the same ruling party since independence, and its policies on promoting and defending multiculturalism and multi-racialism have been an anchor for stability and economic progress in Singapore. A change in government leadership and a change motivated by external forces would be significant. Economic disruption, social and security-based upheaval, violence, and sabotage from PRC nationals acting under direct and indirect inducement from the PRC threaten Singapore, which was built after independence in 1965. Beijing potentially or realistically has such influence over foreigners, and the peaceful functioning of the island republic should be a critical concern for any current and future government.

However, as with all problems, even the aforementioned national migraines for Singapore policymakers have solutions, albeit those that are challenging, require a long implementation horizon, or are harsh. These are difficult sustained efforts to foster a consciously perceived Singapore national identity that is free from foreign influence and successfully inoculates the population against foreign influence operations. Such a societal project could take decades and run the risk of policy-based fatigue. The cost of not seeing it through is the potential risk of being manipulated by foreign state actors against Singapore's best interests.

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THAILAND

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entity the author represents.

I. Introduction

This report aims to assess the security threats and challenges currently facing Thailand. The analysis is structured into three sections.

The first section addresses the broad security challenges Thailand has faced in the post-Cold War era. The authors contend that traditional security threats no longer pose a significant risk to Thailand's survival, with most challenges now being non-traditional. Among these, the authors identified three primary issues: ongoing unrest in the southernmost region, economic stagnation, and foreign-policy disarray. These issues have significant implications for national stability and require a nuanced understanding of their underlying causes and potential solutions.

The second section delves into a detailed analysis of each security challenge. This includes an examination of the background to the challenges, their impact on Thailand, and the perceptions of various stakeholders regarding each issue. Although a detailed assessment of perceptions may warrant separate research, the authors have attempted to provide a broad overview of the similarities and differences in the views held by state actors and the public on each issue. This was achieved by utilizing major published polls, survey results, and insights from various media outlets to approximate our analysis.

The final section focuses on how Thailand has prepared to address these risks and challenges. It assesses measures taken by the Thai government to enhance security, foster economic growth, and maintain regional stability. This section also evaluates the effectiveness of current strategies and identifies areas where improvements are required.

The authors argue that despite the sharp, rapid, and dynamic changes occurring around Thailand, the Thai government has not adequately prepared itself with comprehensive strategic positioning and plans. The lack of a cohesive and forward-looking strategy renders the country vulnerable to both immediate and long-term threats. Therefore, we recommend that the government develop a strategic plan that integrates empirical interests, such as economic and political goals, with normative positions and strategies,

including adherence to norms, values, and principles. Thus, Thailand can better navigate the complexities of its geopolitical landscape and enhance its security and prosperity.

1.1 The Cold War's Demise and Immediate Impacts

The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s marked a pivotal shift in Thailand's security environment. Throughout the Cold War, Thailand's primary security concern was the threat posed by the communist forces, which was significantly heightened by Vietnam's aggressive expansionism in mainland Southeast Asia. This anxiety peaked during Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia on Christmas Day, 1978, posing a direct challenge to Thailand's stability and survival. However, structural changes in the international system in the late 1980s, coupled with Thailand's transition toward democracy, led to a significant reduction in the perceived threat posed by Vietnam.

These geopolitical shifts facilitated reconciliation efforts between conflicting parties in the region. The culmination of these efforts was the resolution of the Cambodian conflict, which was finalized in October 1991 at the Paris Conference on Cambodia. This historic agreement not only resolved a longstanding regional conflict but also ushered in a new era in Southeast Asia's international relations, characterized by a focus on peace and cooperation.

1.2 Emergence of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Concerns

As conventional security threats dissipated, Thailand began to face new, predominantly NTS challenges. Although some traditional security issues persist, particularly along Thailand's extensive borders with neighboring countries, these issues have been managed through bilateral mechanisms, such as joint border committees. These committees work to stabilize borders and resolve territorial disputes, ensuring relative calm and stability. Thailand's non-involvement in the South China Sea maritime disputes has further prevented direct tensions with China, allowing it to focus on internal and regional stability.

In the post-Cold War era, Thailand's security concerns have primarily shifted toward non-traditional issues, many of which are related to human security and domestic challenges. Thailand faces persistent problems related to its long-shared borders, including drug smuggling, human trafficking, illegal immigration, sea piracy, organized crime, and environmental problems, including the management of the Mekong River.

While significant, these issues do not directly threaten the state's stability but require ongoing attention and management. The National Security Policy Paper (NSPP) identified NTS issues as a significant challenge for post-Cold War Thailand. However, the policy approach to addressing these issues lacks consistency. For instance, the NSPP for 1998–2001 mentions money laundering, illicit drugs, illegal workers, and international terrorism within its security-context assessment but does not provide a detailed section addressing these concerns.[1] By contrast, the NSSP for 2015–2021 offers a more comprehensive examination of transnational challenges, including illicit drugs, natural disasters, cybersecurity, and illegal migration.[2] This shift underscores the evolving recognition of NTS issues as critical threats requiring state attention.

The urgency and perceived threat levels of the NTS issues vary across periods, regions, and populations. Consequently, definitively ranking these issues is challenging and subjective. For example, although drug smuggling is prevalent, it does not necessarily undermine a state's legitimacy. By contrast, drug-related issues can sometimes be used politically to bolster government legitimacy, as seen in the Thaksin Shinawatra government's 2003 War on Drugs, a populist policy that resulted in nearly 3,000 extrajudicial killings.[3]

1.3 Identification of Key Risks

This report identifies three major ongoing challenges for Thailand: Southern unrest, economic stagnation, and the management of foreign policy within the current geopolitical context. These challenges are persistent and, in some cases, immediate, undermining the state's legitimacy or hindering the government's ability to address domestic and international issues.

The selection of these three security challenges reflects the authors' assessments and acknowledges the lack of a definitive risk ranking in Thailand. Even the current NSPP (2023–2027) characterizes the threat as a hybrid, combining conventional and NTS challenges.[4] Therefore, the authors' selection was based on the continuity of the issues and the extent to which they affect a wide range of policy management.

Public debate on threat perception in Thailand remains limited. For example, the 2003 election campaign focused primarily on domestic issues, especially economic stagnation, with foreign policies receiving less attention. Only the Progressive Move-Forward Party (MFP) critically addressed Thailand's diminishing international role. Since then, the issue of Southern unrest has largely faded from public discourse, likely due to its geographic isolation and the protracted nature of the conflict, which garners

[1] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (1998–2001)," 1997. https://dl.parliament.go.th/handle/20.500.13072/367180

[2] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (2015–2021)," 2014. https://www.nsc.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/policy58.pdf

[3] Human Rights Watch. "Human Rights Abuses and the War on Drugs," 2004. http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/thailand0704/4.htm

[4] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (2023–2027)," 2022. https://www.nsc.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/nsc-policy-66-70-1.pdf

media attention only during significant incidents, such as bombings of public offices.

1.4 Major Security Challenges: An In-Depth Analysis

The authors identified three major security challenges for this in-depth analysis: Southern unrest, economic stagnation, and foreign-policy disarray. These challenges were selected because of their significant impact on Thailand's security and stability.

Southern unrest is perhaps the most severe and continuous threat to the Thai state. This conflict involves armed insurgencies in the southern provinces that contest the core elements of Thai identity: nationhood, religion, and monarchy. Over the past two decades, this conflict has caused thousands of deaths and numerous casualties, with no resolution in sight. Southern unrest not only directly threatens the government's legitimacy but also challenges the concept of Thai nationhood, making it a critical issue for national security.

Economic stagnation is also a critical threat to Thailand's national security. A stagnant economy undermines the government's ability to provide for citizens, exacerbating issues such as unemployment, poverty, and social unrest. This prolonged economic slowdown has affected Thailand's global competitiveness and diminished its strategic leverage. Addressing economic stagnation is essential to ensure sustainable development and stability in Thailand because economic health is directly linked to national security.

While foreign-policy challenges may not traditionally be considered security issues, they significantly impact Thailand's ability to manage its external environment. Ineffective foreign policies can lead to isolation, reduced influence, and increased vulnerability in international diplomacy. Thailand faces significant challenges in managing its relationships with the major powers, navigating regional dynamics, and responding to global shifts. Ensuring a coherent and strategic foreign policy is crucial to maintaining Thailand's sovereignty and position on the global stage.

The transformation of Thailand's security environment after the Cold War underscores the dynamic nature of national security challenges. As traditional threats recede, new, non-traditional issues have emerged that require adaptive and comprehensive strategies. By addressing Southern unrest, economic stagnation, and foreign-policy disarray, Thailand can enhance its national security and ensure a stable and prosperous future.

The following section delves into these security challenges in greater detail, demonstrating their profound impact on Thailand's security and well-being. Thailand's security landscape has shifted from conventional to predominantly non-traditional concerns. Among the three identified issues, only Southern unrest involves a degree of armed conflict; however, it remains an internal matter involving non-state actors. The analysis highlights how these challenges affect Thailand's core security interests and proposes strategies to address them.

II. Analysis of Selected Issues and Their Current Perception

2.1 Southern Unrest

Southern unrest in Thailand, particularly in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, represents a persistent and violent conflict that fundamentally challenges the nation's integrity. This conflict is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and religious differences, with various insurgent groups advocating greater autonomy and complete independence from the Thai state. Despite the government's efforts to address unrest through military intervention, development programs, and peace negotiations, these measures have had limited success.

The legitimacy of the Thai government has been significantly challenged by this unrest as it grapples with maintaining control and ensuring security in the affected regions. Additionally, the conflict raises critical questions about the inclusiveness and adaptability of Thai national identity, which traditionally emphasizes the triad of nation, Buddhism, and monarchy. The predominantly Muslim population in South Thailand often feels marginalized and disconnected from this national narrative, exacerbating discontent and resistance.

The impact of Southern unrest is profound and encompasses significant human, social, and economic costs. This conflict has resulted in thousands of deaths, injuries, and widespread displacement. Ongoing violence disrupts daily life, impedes economic development, and strains public resources. Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive and long-term solution underscores the persistence of this issue as a critical security challenge in Thailand.

To effectively address Southern unrest, the Thai government must adopt a multifaceted approach that extends beyond military measures. This strategy should include promoting inclusive dialogue, respecting cultural and religious diversity, implementing targeted development programs, and ensuring justice and the protection of human rights in all communities. Building trust and co-operation between local leaders and communities is also essential for achieving sustainable peace.

The root cause of Southern unrest is intrinsically linked to the conflicting historiographies held by the Thai state and most of the local Malay population. The Thai state has historically adhered to a unitary model by constructing an official narrative that underscores the unity of the modern Thai nation. This narrative, as reflected in Thai-school history textbooks, presents

Thai history as a continuum from the Sukhothai Kingdom in the 13th century to the Ayutthaya Empire between the 14th and 18th centuries. In the late 18th century, Bangkok succeeded Ayutthaya, evolving into Siam and subsequently into modern-day Thailand.

The official Thai narrative seldom acknowledges the southernmost region as a distinct entity with its own history. Instead, it portrays the region as a peripheral area inhabited by ethnic Malay-Muslim minorities. According to the Thai state narrative, this area was historically under the suzerainty of the Siamese Kingdom and was officially incorporated into modern Thailand following the demarcation of the border between British Malaya and Siam in the late 19th century.[5]

Although the Thai state perceives the southern periphery as an integral part of the modern Thai nation, the local population has divergent views. Historically, this region was occupied by various groups situated along the ancient trade route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Different kingdoms have been established in this area since the first century BCE. The Kingdom of Patani emerged in the 14th century, gaining prominence as a flourishing trading entrepôt in the upper Malay Peninsula, and it converted to Islam in the mid-15th century.

Following the restoration of the Siamese Kingdom after the fall of Ayutthaya, Patani was attacked by the Siamese, which forced it to become a tributary state of Siam. A series of rebellions against Bangkok ensued, prompting Siam to reassert its rule by dividing the Kingdom into seven states in the early 19th century. Concurrently, British efforts to control the Malay Peninsula trade route led to an agreement between Siam and Britain, demarcating their spheres of influence and sovereignty. Under the Burney Treaty, the British recognized Siam's control over the Patani and other northern Malay sultanates. Patani's ruler also accommodated these two powers by submitting a golden tree as a tribute to Siam. Ultimately, Siam annexed Patani into its modern administrative framework in the early 20th century, effectively ending Patani's status as a self-governing state. This historical context underscores the complex and often contentious relationship between the central Thai state and the local Malay-Muslim population in the southernmost province.

The brief histories outlined above demonstrate the historical and identity-based foundation for ethnic conflict between the local Malay population and the Thai state. Since the incorporation of Pattani into modern Thailand, persistent efforts have been made to liberate Pattani as an independent state or to secure greater autonomy. One of the longstanding separatist movements dates back to the period preceding World War I and evolved into the Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (Islamic Liberation Front of Patani), which was particularly active during the 1970s and 1980s and regained

[5] Aurel Croissant, "Unrest in South Thailand: Contours, Causes, and Consequences since 2001," Contemporary Southeast Asia 27(1) (2005): 21–43. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798718

support in the early 2000s.[6] Additionally, other insurgent groups have also emerged, most of which operate relatively independently and have loose co-ordination.

In 2003, Thailand's Southern unrest reemerged, and since then, it has persisted without a decisive resolution. The conflict has fluctuated in intensity, with periods of escalation and de-escalation, yet incidents such as bombings and killings continue to occur, impeding the establishment of the peace and stability necessary for development opportunities. One significant obstacle to the Thai government's management of the unrest is the presence of multiple active insurgencies, ranging from well-established organizations to loosely organized groups.

The most prominent and active insurgent group was the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (BRN), established in the 1960s. The BRN's driving ideology combined Patani nationalism with revolutionary Islamism, employing both political and armed tactics to advance the peace process and establish a Patani state. The BRN commands a significant number of armed personnel in the area, with members operating flexibly and sometimes autonomously. The geography of the conflict area, which shares a long border with Malaysia and contains dense forests, allows insurgents to easily escape across the border. Many BRN members and sympathizers are religious leaders within the community, which enables them to propagate separatist sentiments among followers, particularly those targeting the youth.

The separatist movement in southern Thailand is primarily ethno-national, with limited evidence linking it to international jihadism. Nevertheless, the influence of international terrorist networks, particularly since the early 2000s, may have infiltrated some groups. For instance, the Southeast Asian terrorist group, Jemaah Islamiyah, received assistance from Muslims in Thailand. However, this connection appears to have targeted Western interests rather than supporting separatism in southern Thailand.[7] Concurrently, the Thai state endeavored to prevent conflicts from escalating into the international arena. Despite these efforts, attempts have been made to establish peace negotiations between the Thai security authorities and groups that claim to represent most insurgents.

Economically, the three southernmost provinces have experienced relatively lower growth than other parts of the southern region and more developed regions of Thailand. Narathiwat Province, for instance, has the lowest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the country.[8] Despite significant budget allocations—approximately THB 500 billion between 2003 and 2024—the region's economic development has remained stunted.[9]

The human costs of these conflicts remain significant. According to the

[6] Barry M. Rubin, Guide to Islamist Movements (M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2010)

[7] Neil J. Melvin, "Islamism and the Patani Insurgency," In: Conflict in Southern Thailand: Islamism, Violence and the State in the Patani Insurgency, 19–27 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2007).

[8] Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, "Gross Regional and Provincial Products: Chain Volume Measures 2021 Edition," Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, May 2023. https://www.nesdc.go.th/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=13913&filename=gross_regional

[9] Southern News Center, "Budget for Unrest in the Southern Regions in 2024 Increased by 450 Million – Reaching 6.6. Billion," Isranews, June 23, 2024. https://www.isranews.org/article/south-news/south-slide/125181-southbudget.html

Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC), nearly 6,000 incidents occurred in the three provinces from 2003 to 2022. These incidents resulted in 19,262 casualties among civilians and law-enforcement personnel. This figure includes 5,836 deaths, 12,541 injuries, and approximately 885 disabilities. Additionally, although the government has spent approximately THB 4.2 billion on various forms of assistance,[10] and there has been a trend toward de-escalating violence, the conflict remains unresolved.

This ongoing security problem reflects the evolving nature of security challenges facing the Thai state in the post-Cold War era. First, while the issue has been longstanding, it has resurfaced within the new context of rising Islamization since September 11, 2001. This global trend has had a profound impact on the Muslim world, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, with increased violence observed in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Second, the resurgence of violence in Thailand's southern provinces underscores the role of non-state actors in modern warfare. Over the past two decades, external funding from insurgent groups has also contributed to sustaining these activities.

However, Thai security authorities face an unfamiliar challenge in addressing the evolving nature of conflict in the southern provinces. This conflict is not only para-militaristic but also inherently political. Although the Thai authorities have occasionally succeeded in suppressing separatist movements through force, such actions have undermined the authorities' legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. It is crucial for the authorities to exercise restraint in the use of force to avoid civilian harm. Moreover, effective public-relations strategies that demonstrate Bangkok's commitment to fairness and justice are essential for gaining the trust and support of the local population.

Conflict resolution is complex in this context. Thai authorities have often struggled to identify the legitimate representatives of insurgent groups. Additionally, the primary agencies handling conflicts are within the security apparatus, particularly the military and police, which often lack expertise in political negotiations and public affairs. Conflict is multidimensional and is rooted in historical grievances, religious differences, and economic and political disparities that have persisted for centuries. Furthermore, criminal activities and syndicates, such as drug smuggling, exacerbate the severity and complexity of conflicts. These organized criminal elements sometimes exploit the situation to instigate attacks on authorities, leading to public misunderstanding about the nature of violence.[11]

Furthermore, this prolonged conflict undeniably benefits certain businesses and individuals, including politicians and the arms industry. Bureaucratic politics reveals that the security apparatus has been granted

[10] Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre, "Statistics of Incidents and Casualties from the Unrest Situation in the Southern Border Provinces (Certified by 3 Parties) from 2003 to 2022)," 2020. https://www.sbpac.go.th/?p=55404

[11] Marc Askew, "Fighting with Ghosts: Querying Thailand's 'Southern Fire,'" Contemporary Southeast Asia 32(2) (2007): 117–155. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41756324

increased authority and, at times, impunity in its operations. As previously mentioned, a larger budget was allocated to the military, police, and related offices responsible for managing conflicts. However, these authorities often lack unity and effective coordination, resulting in disarray in addressing this situation.

At the regional level, support from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries is essential for the Thai state. Co-operation with Malaysian authorities is critical for preventing the escalation of violence. To secure this co-operation, Thailand must demonstrate that it treats the Muslim population in its three southernmost provinces fairly and equitably. This requires a strong political sector capable of leading the security apparatus. However, in the past two decades, Thai politics has been marked by instability and frequent changes in the government. In recent decades, military intervention has weakened political and civilian leadership. Consequently, the political struggle sidelined the conflict in the south within Thai political discourse, leaving the management of Southern unrest predominantly in the hands of the security apparatus. Their strategies and tactics may be ill-suited to effectively address the multifaceted nature of the conflict.

This security challenge remains the most significant in terms of the financial commitment that Thailand has pledged to restore peace and stability. Assessing the National Security Policy from 2003 onwards, it consistently addresses Southern unrest in various contexts. Primarily, it frames unrest as being caused by uneven development between urban and rural areas, exacerbating issues such as mistreatment, injustice, corruption, and organized crime in the southernmost provinces. It also explores the possible connection between these internal grievances and external influences, particularly international terrorist networks, which might inspire radical groups to resist the Thai state.[12]

Thailand's security system has unequivocally focused on this issue, recognizing it as a means of increasing its power, responsibilities, and budget. Substantial funding is required to address this issue. Additionally, specific government agencies have gained prominence due to persistent unrest in the south. The military plays a crucial role in managing unrest by acting as the primary ground force. The SBPAC also benefited from this situation. Established in 1981 to co-ordinate policy and implementation in the five southernmost provinces and foster a better understanding between the central government and local people, the SBPAC was decommissioned in 2002, reflecting a period when the conflict had eased to a manageable level. However, it was revived in 2004 after the unrest reemerged in 2003.

Despite the continuing security challenge it poses to the Thai state, Southern unrest is currently fading due to mainstream public attention and

[12] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (2003–2006)," 2002. https://dl.parliament.go.th/handle/20.500.13072/417240

media coverage. Reports are sporadic, and public interest is piqued only when large-scale casualties and deaths occur. Moreover, one of the main surveys in Thailand that examines public opinions on security issues does not mention the Southern unrest but includes other regional security issues, especially military modernization in neighboring countries.[13] These discrepancies in perceptions between the government and the public highlight several aspects of the conflict. First, the conflict is primarily contained within the three southernmost provinces and remains distant from other parts of Thailand. Consequently, the general public beyond the three provinces may not have been directly affected. Second, the problem has been securitized and routinized by government agencies. Managing conflict has become a standard duty among the concerned agencies, reducing the pressure for urgent responses that might attract media and public attention. Moreover, the Thai government has attempted to avoid internationalizing this issue to garner wider international attention. Peace negotiations with the separatist groups are mostly kept quiet from public attention. Simultaneously, the Thai government attempts to shape the narrative of the situation by avoiding the term "peace negotiation" and instead uses "talks for peace."[14]

Nonetheless, conflict remains a challenging security issue in Thailand. Incidents continue to occur although the number of incidents has declined. In 2023, it was reported that more than 120 people were injured, and 30 people, excluding the instigators, were killed.[15] If this situation is not appropriately managed, it will escalate.

2.2 Economic Stagnation

Considering Thailand's security landscape, characterized more by NTS challenges than traditional military concerns, and global economic and security insecurities, economic stagnation has emerged as an immediate challenge. This issue has been central to Thailand's socio-economic transition. Following the decade-long political unrest precipitated by the 2006 military coup that unseated the Thaksin administration, the Kingdom grappled with economic stagnation for over two decades. Consequently, Thailand has witnessed a significant decline in economic vitality, with its annual GDP growth decreasing from 7% in 2003 to 2.5% in 2022.[16] In recent years, GDP growth has remained low, at 1.6% in 2023, with an estimated growth of approximately 2.6% in 2024 (Figure 1).[17]

[13] "Super Poll: Security, Politics, and Digital Money," June 9, 2024. https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-17406417/documents/89c2317490cd4d8a988d765323021763/Super%20Poll%20ความมั่นคง%20การเมือง%20เงินดิจิทัล.pdf

[14] Policy Watch, "Two Decades of Southern Unrest, the Peace Unattained," June 6, 2024. https://policywatch.thaipbs.or.th/article/government-29

[15] Benar News, "The Trend of Violence in the Southern Border Area May Increase in 2023," January 6, 2024. https://www.benarnews.org/thai/commentary/th-my-abuza-deep-south-violence-01062023160614.html

[16] World Bank, "GDP per Capita Growth (Annual %) Thailand," https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?contextual=max&end=2022&locations=TH&skipRedirection=true&start=2001&view=chart

[17] Bank of Thailand, "Thai Economy: Economic Outlook," https://www.bot.or.th/en/thai-economy/economic-outlook.html

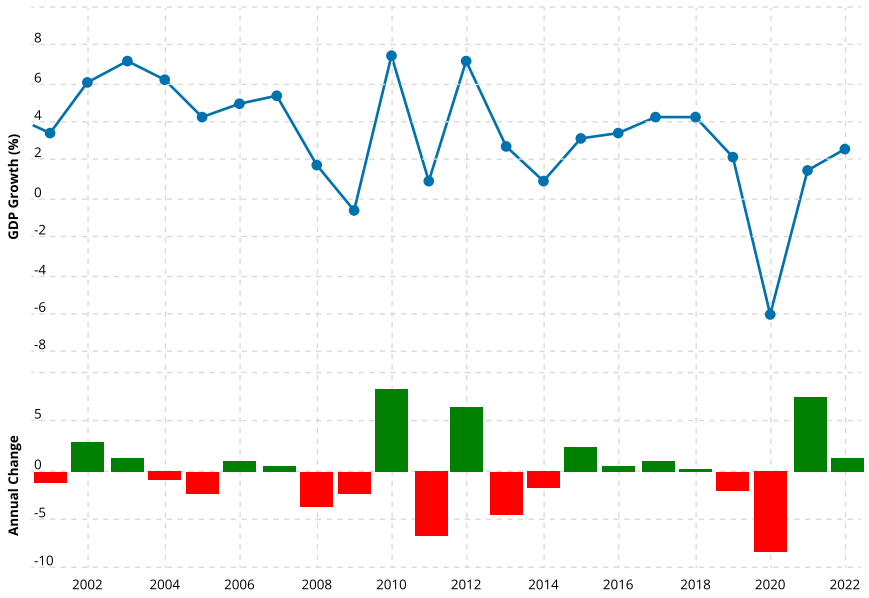


Figure 1. Thailand's annual GDP growth (%) between 2001 and 2022[18]

Thailand's struggle to revitalize and modernize its economy to evade the middle-income trap is palpable. Hindered by outdated infrastructure and a lack of innovative economic strategies, Thailand's policymakers appear constrained by obsolete paradigms that often rely on outdated methods to tackle contemporary challenges. The nation's economic pillars—traditional manufacturing, agricultural exports, and tourism—face intense competition from emerging economies that exemplify the "flying geese" development model. Consequently, its modest economic growth places Thailand among the least rapidly growing economies in the ASEAN region (Figure 2).

GDP Growth Rate (% per year)

	2022	2023		2024	
		April	September	April	September
Southeast Asia	**5.6**	**5.6**	**5.6**	**5.6**	**5.6**
Brunei Darussalam	-1.6	-1.6	-1.6	-1.6	-1.6
Cambodia	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2
Indonesia	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.3
Lao People's Democratic Republic	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5
Malaysia	8.7	8.7	8.7	8.7	8.7
Myanmar	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Philippines	7.6	7.6	7.6	7.6	7.6
Singapore	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6
Thailand	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6
Timor-Leste	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2
Viet Nam	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0

Figure 2. ASEAN member countries' GDP growth rate (% per annum) between 2022 and 2024[19]

Thailand's traditional manufacturing sector, once a robust engine of economic growth, is increasingly being challenged by regional competitors

[18] World Bank, "GDP per Capita Growth."

[19] Asian Development Bank, "Growth Outlook by Subregion," September 2023. https://www.adb.org/outlook/editions/september-2023#subregion

that offer lower production costs and higher efficiency. Countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia attract significant foreign manufacturing investments, eroding Thailand's competitive edge. The agricultural sector, another cornerstone of the Thai economy, is also under pressure. Global market volatility, climate change, and technological advancements in agriculture have exposed vulnerabilities in the agricultural sector, leading to declining productivity and profitability.[20]

Tourism, long heralded as a vital economic driver in Thailand, has faced significant hurdles. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted global travel, drastically reducing tourist arrivals and revenues. Although there has been a gradual recovery, the tourism sector remains susceptible to fluctuations in global economic conditions and geopolitical tensions. More importantly, Thailand lacks a clear direction for improving its tourism industry,[21] and its heavy reliance on low-cost tourism and specific large markets, such as China,[22] renders it susceptible to disruption.

Furthermore, Thailand's infrastructure, particularly its transportation and digital connectivity, has not kept pace with the demands of the modern economy. Outdated transportation networks hinder efficient logistics and supply-chain management, and inadequate digital infrastructure limits innovation and growth in the digital economy. These infrastructural deficits exacerbate the challenges businesses and investors face, discourage new investments, and impede economic progress.[23]

In addition to sector-specific challenges, Thailand's economic-policy framework has struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing global economic landscape. Policymakers often rely on conventional economic strategies that are ill-suited for addressing the complexities of a globalized economy. There is a pressing need for forward-thinking policies to promote technological innovation, enhance human capital, and support sustainable development. However, efforts to implement these reforms have been slow and inconsistent, hampering economic growth.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been a critical driver of Thailand's economic growth since the 1980s. However, recent statistics indicate that Thailand's attractiveness as an FDI destination has steadily declined over the past two decades, particularly compared to other ASEAN countries (Figure 3). An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study highlighted that one critical reason for this decline is the relatively higher cost of production in Thailand compared to other emerging markets in mainland Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam

[20] World Bank, "World Bank Outlines Five Reform Priorities for Thailand to Revitalize Growth," March 25, 2024. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/03/25/world-bank-outlines-five-reform-priorities-for-thailand-to-revitalize-growth

[21] Narumon Kasemsuk, "Thailand Falls by More Than 10 Places in Tourism Ranking," Bangkok Post, May 27, 2024. https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/general/2800278/thailand-falls-by-more-than-10-places-in-tourism-ranking

[22] Tommy Walker, "Why Are Fewer Chinese Tourists Visiting Thailand?" Deutsche Welle, May 12, 2023. https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-fewer-chinese-tourists-visiting-thailand/a-67637283

[23] Asian Development Bank, "Thailand, Industrialization and Economic Catch-up: Country Diagnostic Study," 2015, 43–48. https://www.adb.org/publications/thailand-industrialization-and-economic-catch-up

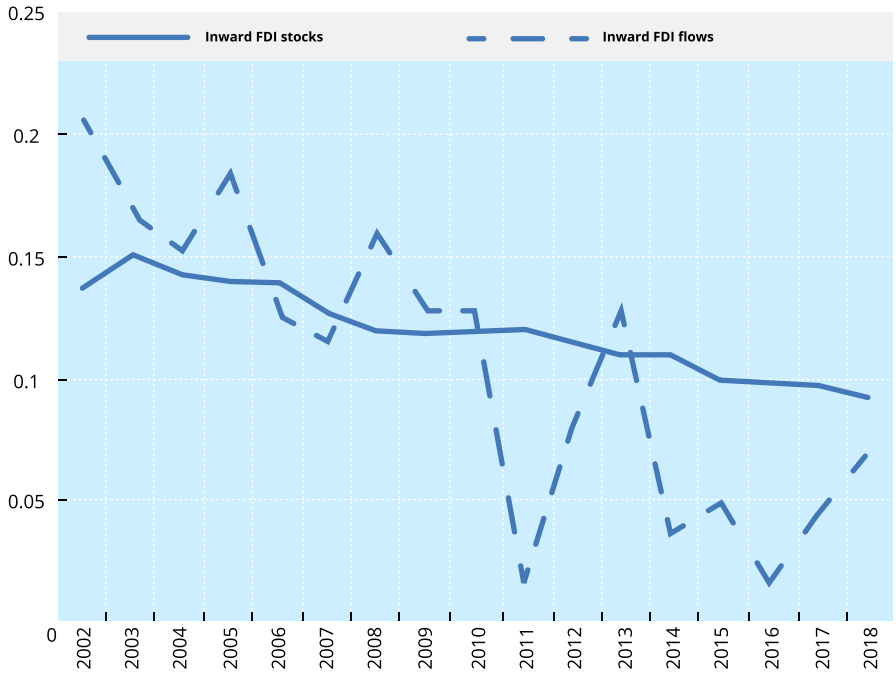


Figure 3. Thailand's inward FDI flows and stocks as the % of total ASEAN countries. Source: OECD

(CLMV),[24] reflecting Thailand's middle-income trap.

Thailand embarked on economic development earlier than many of its regional peers, becoming an FDI haven in the late 1980s following the Plaza Accord. The influx of foreign capital during this period significantly boosted the country's manufacturing sector, which capitalized on low labor costs to attract investment. However, the subsequent economic transformation toward capital-intensive manufacturing has been slow. Therefore, Thailand now finds itself competing for FDI with its less-developed neighbors, who offer lower production costs in similar industries.

Thailand's higher production costs can be attributed to several factors. First, labor costs have risen as the country has developed, diminishing the competitive advantage it once held in this regard. Second, outdated infrastructure and regulatory inefficiencies exacerbate operational costs for foreign investors. By contrast, CLMV countries, with their lower labor costs and improving business environments, present a more attractive proposition for investors seeking cost-efficient production bases. Moreover, Thailand's slow progress in adopting advanced technologies and moving up the value chain in manufacturing has hindered its ability to attract high-value FDIs. While other countries in the region have aggressively pursued policies to modernize their industries and develop a skilled labor force, Thailand's focus has remained mainly on traditional manufacturing sectors.[25] This reliance on low-wage strategies is no longer sustainable in a competitive regional landscape where innovation and technological

[24] OECD, "Trends and Qualities of FDI in Thailand," OECD Investment Policy Reviews, 2021. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-investment-policy-reviews-thailand-2020_c4eeee1c-en.html

[25] Krislert Samphantharak, "The Thai Economy: A Lost Decade?" SSRN, 2019. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3135033

advancement are paramount. Moreover, the service sector contributes more than 40% to the GDP; however, it remains in lower-productivity industries that employ lower-skilled workers,[26] especially tourism. In addition, the agricultural-sector workforce remains significant, accounting for one-third of the workforce, compared to its contribution of only approximately 10% to the GDP.[27]

To regain its attractiveness as an FDI destination, Thailand must undertake significant economic reforms. This should include investing in modern infrastructure, streamlining regulatory processes, and fostering an environment conducive to innovation and high-tech industries. Enhancing the quality of education and vocational training to develop a skilled workforce capable of supporting advanced manufacturing and services is crucial. Additionally, policies aimed at reducing production costs, such as improving energy efficiency and logistics, can help Thailand become a more competitive destination for foreign investment.

Furthermore, diversifying the economy to reduce dependency on traditional manufacturing and developing sectors, such as technology, renewable energy, and high-value services, can attract new types of FDIs. By creating a more dynamic and resilient economic structure, Thailand can compete better with its regional neighbors and achieve sustainable growth. The government has attempted to pursue this strategic direction to upgrade Thailand's industries. However, the effort remains relatively nascent, and its success depends on Thailand's attractiveness compared to neighboring countries that may have more skilled labor or business opportunities, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

Compounding these challenges is a demographic crunch fueled by a worryingly low birth rate of approximately 500,000 births in 2022, the lowest in 77 years. This demographic trend exacerbates existing economic strain, contributing to a tepid economic landscape. These economic challenges, coupled with political strife, have deepened the socio-economic discontent in Thailand. The Economist vividly characterizes Thailand's economic dilemma as "It has gotten old before it has gotten rich," [28] highlighting the nation's struggle to achieve economic prosperity despite its aging population. Consequently, a widening gap between social strata persists, contrasting sharply with Thailand's idealized image as "The Land of Smiles," which often masks the harsh realities of daily life for many Thais.

Moreover, economic stagnation has broader socio-economic implications, perpetuating income inequality and regional disparities and limiting social mobility. This reflects the fact that Thailand is among the most income-unequal countries worldwide. Statistics suggest that approximately 10% of the population earns more than half of the national income.[29]

[26] Ulrich Zachau, "Services as a New Driver of Growth for Thailand," World Bank Blogs, December 28, 2016. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/eastasiapacific/services-as-a-new-driver-of-growth-for-thailand

[27] United Nations, Thailand, "Thai Agricultural Sector: From Problems to Solutions," December 2, 2020. https://thailand.un.org/en/103307-thai-agricultural-sector-problems-solutions

[28] The Economist, "Large Parts of Asia Are Getting Old before They Get Rich," October 12, 2023. https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/10/12/large-parts-of-asia-are-getting-old-before-they-get-rich

[29] World Inequality Database, "What's New about Inequality in South and Southeast Asia in 2023?" November 22, 2023. https://wid.world/news-article/2023-wid-update-south-and-southeast-asia/

Without substantial and sustained economic growth, effective income distribution, and welfare, these issues will likely intensify, potentially leading to social unrest and political instability. Particularly concerning is the plight of the younger generation within a socio-political structure perceived as rigid, hierarchical, and entrenched in patronage networks. This perception fuels widespread corruption, creating formidable barriers for those outside privileged socio-economic circles within the bureaucracy and business sector. Recent surveys, such as Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index in 2023, reflect growing public concern, with Thailand ranking 108 out of 180 countries,[30] indicating a widespread belief that government corruption is a critical issue.

The burgeoning frustration and aspiration for change among Thailand's youth have catalyzed the emergence of new political movements, notably exemplified by the MFP's surprising electoral success. Despite securing most parliamentary seats, the MFP faced challenges in forming a government. Instead, the Pheu Thai Party, a former ally during the election campaign, shifted its alliances to collaborate with other conservative parties, resulting in the establishment of a government under Mr. Srettha Thavisin. This scenario underscores the persistence of entrenched party politics and networks among Thailand's political elites.

These socio-economic and political challenges form the core focus of the current government, which is primarily oriented toward stimulating economic growth. The implications of this economic focus are expected to resonate widely, influencing not only domestic policies but also Thailand's broader foreign relations and security strategies. Given Thailand's heavy dependence on international trade, investment, and tourism, these sectors will significantly shape its policy direction, either opening new avenues of opportunity or imposing constraints on its policy objectives. Therefore, navigating the intricate interplay between domestic socio-economic policies and international economic engagement is crucial for charting Thailand's trajectory in both regional and global arenas.

Economic stagnation in Thailand transcends mere economic implications and profoundly impacts the socio-political arena. Economic hardships, coupled with disillusionment among the younger generation and an entrenched political structure, are driving demands for change. As younger voices increasingly enter the political sphere, there is growing urgency to revitalize Thailand's economy. Since the mid-2000s, Thailand has experienced significant political instability following the military coup that ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Over two decades of political turmoil, exacerbated by economic stagnation, have underscored mounting calls for structural reforms. These intertwined political and economic challenges pose a formidable security risk to Thailand's stability in the near future.

[30] Transparency International, "Our Work in Thailand," 2023. https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/thailand

Although Thailand has historically been a regional economic powerhouse, it is now confronted with substantial hurdles that necessitate a comprehensive and innovative approach. Policymakers must prioritize infrastructure modernization, foster innovation, and implement forward-thinking economic strategies to restore competitiveness and achieve sustainable growth.

Economic stagnation has received enormous attention from both the government and the public, leading to countless debates in the media. The 2023 election campaign may be used as a proxy for this assessment of public attention. A good reflection of the policies proposed by the major parties during the election campaign was evident in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report summarizing the key policy campaigns.[31] Economic policies aimed at stimulating growth are the primary focus of all parties. Reflecting the low growth and wage decline, most parties proposed economic distributive measures, such as injecting different forms of cash into the wider population, debt moratoriums for farmers, and increasing the minimum wage for skilled laborers and new graduates. The major parties also proposed stimulating GDP growth by 5%, stimulating the tourism industry, exploring new industries such as the digital economy, creating more special economic zones, and improving Thailand's infrastructure.

Public sentiment regarding the economic situation is also reflected in the Dusit Poll, a key poll in Thailand. In the survey conducted before the 2023 election, three of the five issues people felt most frustrated with were economic. The first-ranked issue was increasing expenses (52.14%), while the third and fourth were high gas prices (48.31%) and the country's economy (44.35%).[32] Super Poll, another major poll, suggests the same public sentiments regarding the importance of economic issues. The March 2024 survey on what people want to see indicates that 67.4% of the respondents viewed economic stimulation to solve stagnation as an immediate concern, while 61.8% wanted the government to solve the increasing public debt problem.[33]

Thailand's economic stagnation will remain a long-term problem as long as it cannot overcome some of the key factors mentioned earlier, including the low birth rate, diversification of sources of revenue, and industrial transformation to a high-value chain. In 2023, the country's GDP growth remained at 1.9% due to weak exports and fewer incoming Chinese tourists.[34] The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDC) reports that in the first quarter of 2024, GDP growth will only reach 1.5%, and the annual figure will fluctuate only between 2% and 3%,[35] while the World Bank predicts it to be 2.4%.[36] However, with the global recession, the economic slowdown of the Chinese economy, and the trade war between major powers, Thailand may find it more difficult to boost its economy than predicted.

[31] BBC News Thai, "The 2023 Election: The Summary of Key Policy Campaign of the Nine Major Parties before the Election on 14 May," April 18, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-65307789

[32] Dusit Poll, "Thai People and the New Government," May 28, 2023. https://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/UPLOAD_FILES/POLL/2566/PS-2566-1685240715.pdf

[33] Super Poll, "The People's Needs," March 31, 2024. https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-17406417/documents/95c807c2aec84cccbeffe39afb38f419/Super%20Poll%20%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%95%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%82%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%99.pdf

[34] Apornrath Phoonphongphiphat, "Thailand's 2023 GDP Growth Slows to 1.9% on Weak Exports," Nikkei Asia, February 19, 2024. https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Thailand-s-2023-GDP-growth-slows-to-1.9-on-weak-exports

[35] Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, "Thai Economic Performance in Q1 of 2024 and the Outlook for 2024," NESDC News, May 20, 2024. https://www.nesdc.go.th/nesdb_en/article_attach/article_file_20240520091503.pdf

[36] World Bank, "Thailand Economic Monitor July 2024: Unlocking the Growth Potential of Secondary Cities," July 3, 2024. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/publication/temjuly2024

2.3 Foreign-Policy Disarrays

The escalating rivalry between the United States (US) and China, particularly evident in the trade tensions since 2018, is among the most pivotal global issues. This dynamic has prompted Thailand to adjust its diplomatic approach to maintain a strategic balance. Meanwhile, ongoing geopolitical events such as the prolonged conflict in Ukraine since 2022 and unexpected tensions in the Gaza Strip that intensified in October 2023 have added further complexity to the volatile international security landscape. These dynamics are poised to cause significant fluctuations in the global economy in the coming years. Compounding this projection is the expected economic slowdown in China, which threatens to dampen the nation's fragile post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Close to Thailand's borders, the enduring Myanmar crisis presents a pressing challenge to Thailand's foreign policy, requiring a nuanced approach to conflict resolution and humanitarian aid. Positioned at the nexus between regional stability and global geopolitics, Thailand must craft a foreign policy that responds to both global trends and regional commitments.

The convergence of these regional challenges with broader international relations underscores the necessity for Thailand to adopt a flexible and comprehensive foreign policy framework. Such a framework would empower Thailand to navigate immediate geopolitical shifts while aligning its strategic interests with the evolving global economic and political landscapes. As Thailand aims to strengthen its international role, its ability to adequately balance global pressure with regional imperatives is crucial for achieving sustained growth and stability.

In recent decades, Thailand's foreign policy has been criticized for its perceived lack of innovation and leadership. Political turmoil since the mid-2000s, including military intervention until 2019, has hindered consistent policy direction. These domestic challenges have often overshadowed Thailand's engagement in external affairs. The 2014 military intervention further complicated Thailand's strategic alignment with the major global powers. Consequently, Thailand's management of key international issues has been perceived as ineffective.

Despite the civilian government's assumption of power in 2023, the lingering effects of past instability continue to influence Thailand's foreign policy landscape. Addressing these challenges is essential for Thailand as it seeks to assert itself more effectively globally and navigate the complexities of contemporary international relations.

2.3.1 The US–China Competition

Navigating the escalating US–China rivalry poses a significant challenge to Thailand's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Historically adept at maintaining a delicate balance between these global powers, Thailand now faces mounting pressure to choose sides as tensions rise, especially in critical areas such as the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

In the past, Thailand has skillfully navigated this balance, leveraging economic advantages from its close ties with China while relying on its longstanding security alliance with the US to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region. Bangkok has actively expanded its global partnerships by fostering diverse collaborations with India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, European nations, and other developing countries.

However, increasing geopolitical tensions have constrained Thailand's ability to sustain this strategy. Nearly a decade of military-led governance after the 2014 coup has shifted Thailand's alignment closer to Beijing. China has emerged as a viable alternative partner for defense co-operation and military modernization, as evidenced by joint exercises, patrols, military procurement, and discussions on technology transfer during the coup government.[37] While the Thai-US Cobra Gold Exercise remains pivotal, analysts are concerned that military engagement with China could gain prominence over time, potentially reshaping Thailand's regional strategic alignment.[38] As Thailand navigates these complex dynamics, its ability to maintain flexibility and adaptability in its foreign policy is crucial for safeguarding its interests amid the intensifying rivalry between the world's two largest economies.

Thailand's increasing alignment with Beijing has become the cornerstone of its economic strategy, particularly amid ongoing economic challenges. This shift in foreign policy is not confined to specific regimes but spans different political administrations. For instance, the Srettha government actively pursued closer economic ties with China to address its economic stagnation. Attending the 3rd Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit in China in October 2023 exemplified this strategy, in which Srettha aimed to enhance economic co-operation by seeking increased Chinese investment and trade. Initiatives such as expediting infrastructure projects including the high-speed railway underscore Thailand's commitment to leveraging Chinese partnerships for economic growth.

Additionally, the introduction of visa-free entry for Chinese nationals in September 2023 complements Thailand's broader strategy of revitalizing its tourism sector following the pandemic. These steps highlight Thailand's proactive approach to harnessing economic opportunities with China while

[37] Bangkok Biznews, "Thailand's Request for China to Jointly Set up a Military Maintenance Facility in Thailand is Confirmed," March 10, 2017. https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/744451

[38] Surachart Bamrungsuk, "Thai-Chinese Special Relationship and Thailand's Foreign Affairs Landscape," Matichon Weekly, July 6, 2017. https://www.matichonweekly.com/column/article_43670

navigating global economic uncertainties and domestic development challenges. Notably, Mr. Srettha Thavisin has actively flagged the Land Bridge Project on the southern seaboard to start operations by 2030. This ambitious infrastructure initiative aims to create a land-based link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans crossing Thailand's southern peninsula. This project involves the construction of deep seaports in Chumphon in the Gulf of Thailand and Ranong in the Andaman Sea. These ports are connected via a network of railways and roads. The overarching goal of this development is to tap into the congested traffic in the Strait of Malacca and provide an alternative shipping route through Thailand.

The Land Bridge Project in Thailand's southern region holds substantial promise for local economic growth through extensive infrastructure development. However, it faces significant challenges, such as attracting investors and persuading users to choose this route over established routes such as Singapore and the Strait of Malacca. Strategically, the project is advantageous for China as it provides an additional link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans under Thai control. Upon completion, this project will offer China a new maritime access route through mainland Southeast Asia, seamlessly integrating Thailand's extensive road and rail networks that extend throughout the region. The operational Laos-China railway, already linked to the Thailand-China high-speed railway under construction, enhances this connectivity. This development will enable China to access the Indian Ocean via a route that bypasses the contentious South China Sea, where territorial disputes involving China, the US, and their allies persist. The involvement of Chinese businesses in this project could inadvertently bolster China's economic and political influence in Thailand in the long term. This underscores the strategic implications of infrastructure projects in shaping regional dynamics and economic relationships, and highlights Thailand's evolving role in a broader geopolitical context.[39]

Thailand's recent attempts to readjust its international strategy face significant complexities amid the escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing. Increased co-operation with either power risks signaling a preference, potentially disrupting Thailand's longstanding balanced approach. This challenge was compounded by the shifting alignment of Thailand's key partners toward Washington, particularly regarding security matters. Participation in US-led initiatives, such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, AUKUS, and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), demonstrates a growing regional trend toward clearer security alignments. The frequency of joint military exercises and maritime patrols among these partners highlights a shift toward more assertive security postures in the Indo-Pacific region. Navigating these dynamics presents Thailand with the delicate task of maintaining diplomatic equilibrium while responding to evolving regional security dynamics. The strategic choices made in this context will shape Thailand's role in the Indo-

[39] Pongphisoot Busbarat, "'Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind': The Continuing Significance of the China Factor in Thailand's Foreign Policy Orientation," Contemporary Southeast Asia 46(1) (2024): 125–146. https://doi.org/10.1355/cs46-1f

Pacific region and broader international relationships in the coming years.

In an evolving geopolitical landscape, the prospect of countries being pressured to align with one side is becoming more plausible. For Thailand, this scenario necessitates a careful evaluation of its strategic interests and the potential for significant shifts in foreign relations and security policies. As regional dynamics increasingly align around distinct blocs, Thailand's longstanding policy of balanced diplomacy faces substantial challenges. Thailand's strategic response demands diplomatic skills, forward-thinking strategic planning, and a deep understanding of evolving regional and global geopolitical trends. Effectively navigating these complexities is crucial for Thailand to uphold its interests, preserve its regional stability, and maintain its role as a key player in the evolving Indo-Pacific region.

2.3.2 Thailand's Incoherent Stance on Major Global Conflicts

Thailand's traditional foreign policy, often metaphorically described as "bamboo bending in the wind," is currently facing increasing scrutiny. Historically celebrated for its strategic flexibility, this approach has allowed Thailand to adeptly navigate the changing tides of global politics. However, in today's multifaceted and rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, many perceive this strategy as insufficient.

During General Prayut Chan-o-cha's administration, Thailand adopted a notably low-profile stance on the global stage. This passive approach drew criticism from foreign policy experts, who argued that Thai diplomacy lacked the proactive engagement and innovative strategies necessary to address contemporary international challenges. Critics have pointed out that Thailand's foreign policy was reactive rather than proactive, failing to assert its influence or leverage its strategic position in Southeast Asia.

Managing Russia's invasion of Ukraine during the Prayut administration clearly illustrates this evolving dynamic. In March 2022, Thailand joined the international community by voting to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, calling for its immediate withdrawal. This decision aligned Thailand with the global majority, emphasizing its commitment to international law and sovereignty. However, in a notable shift, Thailand abstained from a United Nations (UN) vote in October 2022 condemning Russia's annexation of Eastern Ukrainian territories. Thai officials justified this abstention as a gesture of neutrality, suggesting that it was aimed at fostering opportunities for negotiation between the conflicting parties. They argued that maintaining a neutral stance could position Thailand as a potential mediator capable of facilitating dialogue and de-escalation.[40] This abstention was also seen as a strategic move to demonstrate goodwill toward Russia and

[40] Poramet Tangsathaporn, "Thailand Abstains in UN vote; Refuses to Condemn Russian Annexation," Bangkok Post, October 14, 2022. https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2414103/thailand-abstains-in-un-vote

encourage President Vladimir Putin to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit held in Bangkok in December 2022.[41] Thailand's desire to host President Putin at the APEC Summit was driven by economic and diplomatic considerations that reflected the importance of maintaining positive relations with major global powers.

The diplomatic approach under Mr. Srettha Thavisin's new government appears to echo previous patterns, presenting immediate challenges in articulating a consistent stance on global issues, such as the Ukraine conflict and Israeli-Palestinian escalation. Thailand's varying votes on Ukraine-related resolutions, from initial condemnation of the invasion to subsequent abstentions, have raised questions about its position and commitment to international norms. While many nations disagreed with Russia's actions and pressured Moscow to withdraw from Ukraine, Mr. Srettha Thavisin continued to show Thailand's willingness to reaffirm and further strengthen bilateral ties with Russia. Mr. Srettha Thavisin's meeting with President Putin underscored this posture during the BRI Summit in Beijing in October 2023. This discussion focused on enhancing trade and investment co-operation and culminated in an invitation to President Putin to visit Thailand in the near future.[42] However, this stance toward Russia contrasts with Thailand's security alliance with the US, creating a complex dynamic when Thailand seeks to re-invigorate its ties with Washington.

Navigating these diplomatic challenges requires Mr. Srettha Thavisin's government to carefully balance its historical ties, national and regional interests, and global commitments. Strengthening ties with Russia can provide both economic benefits and geopolitical leverage. However, maintaining a robust alliance with the US is crucial for Thailand's security and regional stability. The ability to articulate a coherent foreign policy that aligns with Thailand's strategic objectives while navigating complex international relationships is crucial for shaping its role on the global stage.

The recent conflict in the Gaza Strip has had profound implications for Thailand, marked by the tragic loss of 41 Thai lives and the hostage-taking of several Thai workers. This situation demands a response that delicately balances humanitarian concerns with diplomatic negotiations to ensure the safe release of hostages. This sensitive and urgent matter requires the Thai government to swiftly mobilize its diplomatic channels and navigate the complexities of international conflict resolution.[43] Addressing the hostage situation extends beyond merely taking a stance on the conflict; it involves safeguarding Thai citizens and their interests abroad. This requires a nuanced approach, which includes several critical actions. Providing immediate consular assistance to those affected is paramount to ensuring their well-being and offering support to their families. This includes medical care, psychological support, and legal assistance as needed. Second, engaging in strategic diplomacy is essential to securing the release of hostages.

[41] Sebastian Strangio, "Why Did Thailand Abstain on This Week's UN Vote on Ukraine?" The Diplomat, October 13, 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/why-did-thailand-abstain-on-this-weeks-un-vote-on-ukraine/

[42] The Nation, "PM Srettha Meet Russian President Putin in Beijing," October 17, 2023. https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/policies/40031989

[43] Khaosod English, "Two More Thai Hostages Have Died in Gaza, PM Offers Condolences to Their Families," May 17, 2024. https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2024/05/17/two-more-thai-hostages-have-died-in-gaza-pm-offers-condolences-to-their-families/

This involves working closely with international partners, leveraging relationships with key stakeholders, and utilizing backchannel communication to facilitate negotiations. The Thai government must employ a combination of diplomatic pressure, mediation, and incentives to achieve positive outcomes.

2.3.3 The Geopolitical Competition in the Mekong Subregion

Given its central location in mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand is influenced by numerous factors and conditions that have significantly shaped its foreign policy. The Mekong Subregion, which encompasses five mainland Southeast Asian countries—Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—plays a crucial role in the regional economic and political dynamics. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region Economic Cooperation Program (GMS Program), this area has become a focal point of engagement in the US, China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

The Mekong Subregion, as it is often referred to, is highly politicized and is known by various names, including "Far East India," "Indo-China," and the "Greater Mekong Subregion." These names originated in different historical periods and have distinct political and economic implications for regional development. Additionally, the subregion has seen the development of numerous regional initiatives supported by international organizations and major powers. These include the GMS Program, Japan-Mekong Cooperation, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), Mekong-US Partnership, Mekong-ROK Cooperation, and Mekong-Australia Partnership. Such initiatives place the Mekong Subregion at the forefront of regional co-operation, particularly emphasizing regional transport development.[44]

Regional initiatives arise from political competition, further stimulating the economic and political dynamics within the subregion. These initiatives aim not only to foster development through infrastructure, human-resource development, and environmental and social projects but also to provide superpowers with opportunities to engage with the subregion, thereby helping to balance power dynamics. In addition to offering economic- and social-development assistance, these co-operation areas address the threats and challenges facing the subregion, such as human security, environmental issues, cybersecurity, and human and drug trafficking. At the international level, the US' FOIP, China's BRI, and Japan's FOIP are reshaping economic and security orders. The FOIP conceptualizes the Mekong Subregion as a critical link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, while China's BRI seeks to integrate the Mekong Subregion into its international production networks. These transformations in the international order and

[44] Narut Charoensri, "The Clashes Within: How Do Thai Government Agencies and NGOs View China's Rise?" Asian Perspective 48(3) (2024): 459–478. https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2024.a935486

subregional initiatives challenge Thailand's traditional security and risk perceptions.

Against the backdrop of global superpower competition and its regional implications, Thailand faces three significant challenges: First, Thailand must prepare to navigate the geopolitical and geo-economic transformations prompted by the FOIP and BRI. Second, Thailand must strategically position itself within regional initiatives to maximize opportunities across various areas of co-operation. Third, the Mekong River has emerged as a critical battleground in superpower competition, necessitating a clear articulation of Thailand's geostrategic stance. These phenomena profoundly impact Thailand's position, requiring a clear and explicit articulation of its geostrategic choices.

Furthermore, regional initiatives in the subregion are heavily politicized. There has been an increase in the number of initiatives supported by the US, China, and Japan, each with different memberships. For example, China does not participate in major regional organizations, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC). This absence hinders effective river governance in this subregion. Other regional initiatives, such as the GMS Program, face constraints stemming from domestic dynamics within member countries. For example, when Myanmar hosted the 26th Ministerial Conference of the GMS Program in Naypyidaw, it faced criticism from civil society. The critics argued that the GMS Program not only allowed the "illegal junta" to participate but also appointed it as the host of the ministerial conference. These groups called for the immediate cancellation of the planned conference or urged members to decline attendance.[45] This situation reflects that while the subregion has developed numerous platforms and mechanisms offering economic and political opportunities, it must address its member countries' domestic politics, which significantly affect regional dynamics. As a neighbor to Myanmar and a participant in many regional initiatives, Thailand must develop a robust yet flexible foreign policy toward Myanmar and these initiatives. Thailand's policy toward Myanmar must also balance international pressure against the junta with the ramifications of its internal conflicts, particularly the influx of migrants. Consequently, the geopolitical context in the Mekong Subregion imposes additional constraints on Thailand's foreign policy, challenging its efforts to regain its leading role and manage its impact on stability and peace in the region.

Apart from the Mekong Subregion as a geographical setting, the Mekong River is a vital international waterway that flows from the Tibetan Plateau through China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, ultimately reaching the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Governance of this river has become a critical issue among riparian states, especially because of China's extensive upstream dam-construction projects. These projects have sparked considerable debate and concern over their environmental impacts

[45] Mizzima, "Myanmar Junta to Host 26th Ministerial Conference of the Greater Mekong Subregion," December 7, 2023. https://www.mizzima.com/article/myanmar-junta-host-26th-ministerial-conference-greater-mekong-subregion

on the Lower Mekong countries. The ecological consequences of dams include altered water flow, reduced sediment transport, and disrupted fish-migration patterns, all of which have significant implications for the livelihoods and food security of millions of people living downstream. These environmental challenges have elicited varied responses from the international community.[46]

For instance, the US has expressed concerns regarding the sustainability and ecological impact of these developments. The MRC, the only international organization in the subregion dedicated to addressing the environmental issues of the Mekong River, plays a crucial role in river management and governance. However, the effectiveness of the MRC has been hampered by a lack of active involvement from China, the upstream country with the most significant influence on river flow. The lack of China's participation in the MRC remains a contentious issue. While the MRC fosters co-operation and sustainable management among the Lower Mekong countries, excluding China from its framework limits the commission's ability to address the full scope of environmental challenges facing the river. This situation highlights the complexities of international river governance and the need for more inclusive and co-operative approaches to managing shared natural resources. While Thailand continues to navigate the geopolitical complexities of the Indo-Pacific through economic engagement and strategic ambiguity, the Mekong River issue exemplifies the broader challenges it faces in balancing national interests with regional stability and environmental sustainability.

The environmental challenges posed by the Mekong River destabilize security arrangements within the subregion and significantly impact economic and security configurations across the broader Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, China's extensive dam-construction projects on the Mekong River have had profound environmental repercussions, including altered water flow, reduced sediment transport, and disrupted ecosystems. These changes have seriously affected the livelihoods of local populations in the Lower Mekong River Basin, which depend on the river for agriculture, fishing, and daily sustenance.[47]

Recognizing the severity of these impacts, the US has increased its involvement in the region. The environmental degradation caused by China's dam construction has prompted the US to adopt a more active role in addressing the resultant challenges. This involvement is not merely an ecological concern but also a strategic move, as the US seeks to maintain its influence and leadership in the subregion. The US response has been multifaceted, employing both bilateral and multilateral approaches to counterbalance China's growing presence and initiatives.

China's activities on the Mekong River are part of a broader strategic

[46] Khac Giang Nguyen, "The Mekong Region Struggles Economically and Politically but Maintains Geopolitical Balance," East Asian Forum, January 9, 2024. https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/09/the-mekong-region-struggles-economically-and-politically-but-maintains-geopolitical-balance/

[47] Poramet Tangsathaporn, "Mekong Basin Projects 'Doing More Harm Than Good,'" Bangkok Post, February 18, 2024. https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2744094/mekong-basin-projects-doing-more-harm-than-good

framework that includes various platforms and initiatives designed to enhance its influence and challenge the US-dominated order in the Indo-Pacific. Among these is the LMC, which aims to foster collaboration and development among Mekong countries, and China's high-speed railway diplomacy, which seeks to strengthen infrastructural connectivity and economic ties. China launched several global initiatives to achieve its strategic goals. The Global Security Initiative emphasizes collective security and aims to build a new international relationship centered on mutual respect and win-win co-operation. The Global Development Initiative promotes sustainable development and reduces poverty through international co-operation and shared prosperity. The Global Civilization Initiative also seeks to enhance cultural exchange and mutual understanding among nations.[48]

These platforms and initiatives are integral to China's grand strategy to reshape regional and global order. They serve as mechanisms through which China can project its influence, secure its interests, and provide alternatives to existing US-led frameworks. Through these efforts, China aims to present itself as a leading power capable of offering viable solutions to global challenges, thereby contesting the traditional dominance of the US in the Indo-Pacific region.

The interplay between these strategic maneuvers highlights the complex and dynamic nature of regional geopolitics. As China continues to expand its influence through multifaceted approaches, the US is compelled to adapt and respond to maintain its leadership and uphold the existing order. The situation in the Mekong River Basin exemplifies this broader geopolitical contest in which environmental issues intertwine with strategic interests, shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to superpower competition, Thailand faces a myriad of security issues. These include cybersecurity threats, telephone scams, disruptive technologies, transboundary haze, human and drug trafficking, and illegal cross-border activities. These are just a few examples of security risks that have compelled Thailand to reassess and reconsider its security plans.

2.3.4 The Crisis in Myanmar and Thailand's Diplomatic Response

The evolving crisis in Myanmar was a critical test of Thailand's foreign policy, shaping its regional diplomatic strategy. Since late 2022, the Thai government has approached this complex situation through a policy of "quiet diplomacy," engaging in discreet and multifaceted dialogues, particularly at the ministerial level. A notable initiative was establishing a Track 1.5 minilateral dialogue aimed at including Myanmar's military leadership in peace negotiations. This forum invited a consortium of aligned nations, including China, India, Bangladesh, Laos, Vietnam, and Brunei.

[48] Narut Charoensri, "China's Alternative Approach to Security along the Mekong River," United States Institute of Peace, April 16, 2024. https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/04/chinas-alternative-approach-security-along-mekong-river

This measured approach allowed Thailand to initiate dialogue with Naypyidaw while maintaining influence in fostering co-operation with Myanmar, particularly in efforts toward peaceful conflict resolution and humanitarian aid along their shared borders. Leading these efforts, Thailand has formed a Humanitarian Task Force overseen by foreign ministers. This coalition collaborated with various UN agencies and global organizations to establish a humanitarian corridor, which is still in the process of becoming fully operational.

Despite some tangible but modest achievements, the delivery of humanitarian aid and engagement with senior UN officials have faced frequent delays and impediments from local military factions. Although symbolically significant, the conditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's ousted leader, did not substantially ease Myanmar's legal challenges. She remained under house arrest, confronting, cumulatively, 14 charges that collectively led to 27 years of imprisonment.

Thailand's foreign policy during the Myanmar crisis was shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors, reflecting the country's unique political dynamics. In terms of geopolitics, Thailand shares a long and porous border with Myanmar, rendering it vulnerable to spillover effects from conflicts such as refugee flows and cross-border insurgencies. A strong stance against Myanmar could exacerbate these issues, making it difficult for Thailand to manage border security. Myanmar is Thailand's significant economic partner, particularly in terms of natural resources and trade. Adopting a firm stance could jeopardize economic relations, impacting businesses and economic interests, particularly in border areas. Simultaneously, as a member of ASEAN, Thailand is supposed to adhere to ASEAN's consensus.

Thailand's civilian government has less power to determine foreign policy, especially regarding sensitive border issues. The Thai military has traditionally held significant power over national security and foreign policy, particularly in neighboring countries. This limits civilian governments' ability to independently shape and implement foreign policies. Adopting a strong stance on Myanmar could provoke internal political friction and undermine civilian governmental stability and authority. Thailand's bureaucratic structure and historical precedents also limit the civilian government's ability to diverge from established policies and practices that are heavily influenced by the military. This civil-military relationship is still reflected in the current cabinet. For example, Mr. Sutin Klungsang, who was experienced in the education field rather than in security issues, was appointed as Defense Minister. However, he is sandwiched between the former junta's mentees, General Natthapon Nakpanich and General Somsak Rungsita, as his secretary and advisor, respectively.[49]

[49] Busbarat, "Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind," 139.

The Thai army prioritizes national security and stability, which leads to a cautious approach to dealing with the Myanmar crisis. The potential for border conflict, refugee inflows, and insurgent activities are the primary concerns. The army maintain a strategic relationship with the Myanmar military, which is crucial for managing border issues and ensuring regional stability. This relationship often requires a pragmatic and less confrontational approach. In Myanmar, the relationship between the Thai military and Tatmadaw is widely known to be warm and close.[50] Therefore, the civilian government often maintains a delicate balance with the military. The Thai army's control over policy implementation implies that any diplomatic or humanitarian initiative by the civilian government must align with the military's strategic interests and security considerations.

Thailand's minilateral approach to addressing the crisis in Myanmar has drawn scrutiny and criticism from several ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. These nations perceive Thailand's strategy as diverging from the ASEAN five-point consensus, which aims to promote unity and a collective approach within the ASEAN community. This criticism highlights the delicate balance Thailand must navigate between pursuing its own diplomatic initiatives and upholding ASEAN's collective aspirations.

The ASEAN five-point consensus emphasizes principles such as the cessation of violence, dialogue among all parties, humanitarian assistance, and a special envoy appointment to facilitate mediation efforts. Thailand's minilateral dialogues, aimed at engaging Myanmar's military leadership in peace talks, may be seen as potentially undermining ASEAN's efforts to present a unified stance on Myanmar's internal affairs.[51] This tension underscores the complexity of Thailand's role in managing Myanmar's crisis within an ASEAN framework. As Thailand seeks to contribute to a peaceful resolution and humanitarian aid while maintaining its diplomatic engagement, it must navigate sensitivities among ASEAN member states and uphold the organization's collective diplomatic approach.

Subsequently, as Thailand's foreign policy on the Myanmar crisis is characterized by a cautious and pragmatic approach, heavily influenced by the military, and due to geopolitical, economic, and security implications as well as institutional constraints, the civilian government has limited power to assert a clear and independent stance. However, the Thai army's predominant role ensures that policies toward Myanmar prioritize stability, security, and strategic relationships over explicit condemnations or interventions. This nuanced position allows Thailand to navigate the complexities of its domestic and regional environments while maintaining diplomatic flexibility.

[50] Narayanan Ganesan, "Policy Responses of the ASEAN States towards the Myanmar Military Coup," Hiroshima Peace Research Journal 11 (2024): 95–114.

[51] Resty Woro Yuniar, "Thailand's Myanmar Talks open up Diplomatic Track 'Parallel' to ASEAN's, Deepen Regional Divide," South China Morning Post, July 14, 2023. https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3227604/thailands-myanmar-talks-open-diplomatic-track-parallel-aseans-deepen-regional-divide

Public-opinion surveys on foreign affairs are rare in Thailand, and major polling organizations such as the NIDA Poll, Suan Dusit Poll, and Super Poll primarily focus on domestic and social issues, particularly preferred political parties, elections, social problems, and economic well-being. Nevertheless, some opinion polls gauge the Thai public's perception of the Kingdom's foreign policy. These surveys indicate that while the government and public may share views on specific issues, such as Thailand's regional role, they differ on others, such as the US-China rivalry, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Mekong issues.

The Asia Foundation (AF) in Bangkok recently conducted a survey on international issues that served as a proxy for understanding Thai public perceptions of foreign-policy challenges.[52] The survey demonstrates that the Thai public prioritizes economic growth over national security, consistent with this report's assessment of economic stagnation and Southern unrest as key security challenges. However, geopolitical competition between major powers is ranked low in the AF survey, suggesting that the US-China rivalry feels distant for the average citizen, who is more concerned with issues that impact their daily lives. Consequently, the public agreed that maintaining a balanced posture was suitable in the present situation. Public satisfaction with the current foreign policy reduces pressure on the government to adjust its stance on major global concerns, which explains why the Thai government maintains a friendly attitude toward Moscow despite its invasion of Ukraine. This policy stance contradicts the AF survey, which demonstrated that over 60% of respondents disagreed with the invasion.

The AF survey also illustrated that respondents viewed both China and the US as important to Thailand. However, despite the longstanding Thai-US alliance, they consider China to be more important than the US. A 2024 Pew Research Center survey revealed similar findings, indicating that views on China among Thai people are relatively balanced and reflect broader regional trends. In Thailand, as in several middle-income countries, perceptions of China are mixed but are generally more favorable than views in high-income nations. While a substantial segment of the Thai population views China favorably, concerns about China's international behavior and role in regional geopolitics persist. This dichotomy highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of Sino-Thai relations.[53] Therefore, the perceptions of both the public and government toward China are congruent, and consequently, it is unsurprising that Thailand's foreign policy has accommodated Beijing. However, efforts to rebalance these relationships have been slow and insubstantial. Unlike other US allies and strategic partners in the region, Thailand is reluctant to actively embrace a US-led FOIP, primarily due to concerns about offending China.[54]

[52] The Asia Foundation, "Thai Public Views on International Issues," June 2024. https://asiafoundation.org/publication/thai-public-views-on-international-issues/

[53] Laura Silver, "More People View the US Positively than China across 35 Surveyed Countries," Pew Research Center, July 9, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/09/more-people-view-the-us-positively-than-china-across-35-surveyed-countries/

[54] Busbarat, "Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind."

III. Reflection of Security Issues in Current and Foreseeable Foreign- and Security-Policy *Approaches Toward the Indo-Pacific*

3.1 Current Approaches in Security Policy

The challenges triggered by the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific strategies have led to different responses. Many countries have launched their own interpretations of the threats and challenges. Thailand has not developed a strategic viewpoint on the "Indo-Pacific;" accordingly, it has not translated this concept into its national security plan. Thailand's security is developed under a plan from the Office of the National Council of Security (NCS), which is the focal point of formulating a five-year national security policy and plan. Based on the responses from Thailand's NCS after Shinzo Abe coined the first idea of the Indo-Pacific in 2016, it is evident that the NCS recognizes the strategic changes in the international order in which the Indo-Pacific strategy, China's BRI, and the existing international liberal order clash. According to the NSPP (2019–2022), changes in the international security environment are vital for Thailand's repositioning of its foreign policy:

> *"There have been policy shifts among the superpowers that indicate a tendency toward increasing competition and expansion of their influence, both military and economic, for their national interest. The competition is especially fierce between the United States and China as both countries try to secure alliance from small and medium-sized countries. While the United States follows the Indo-Pacific Strategy, China adopted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Strategy with the goals of securing economic, trade, investment and the inter-regional infrastructure connecting Asia, Africa and Europe. To achieve these goals, China tries hard to extend its political and diplomatic influences over ASEAN countries which resulted in more regional conflict."*[55]

Despite mentioning the Indo-Pacific region in the document, no specific strategies were outlined in the NSPP for 2019–2022. This omission has left a notable gap in the strategic framework. However, five years later, the updated NSPP for 2023–2027 addresses this issue. The new document explicitly states the following:

[55] Office of the National Security Council, "The National Security Policy and Plan (2019–2022)," 2020, 3–4. https://www.nsc.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-National-Security-Policy-and-Plan2019-%E2%80%93-2022.pdf

> *"Due to differences in values, cultures, levels of development, and systems of governance, ASEAN faces challenges in establishing common rules and values. These challenges can significantly impact issues such as preventing and resolving threats among ASEAN member countries, maintaining unity, ensuring centrality, and ASEAN's perspective on the Indo-Pacific concept (ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific: AOIP)."*[56]

The NSPP for 2023–2027 acknowledges the importance and strategic implications of ongoing superpower competition in the Indo-Pacific region. However, it does not explicitly outline Thailand's strategy for responding to these dynamics. This absence of a clear strategic direction is noteworthy, particularly given the increasing geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Thailand has not yet developed a comprehensive national document that addresses and responds to burgeoning Indo-Pacific strategies. We argue that the underlying reason for the lack of a defined strategy lies in Thailand's inherently flexible foreign policy. This policy of not explicitly aligning with the other side has been the cornerstone of Thailand's diplomatic approach for many years. Amidst intensifying competition between global superpowers in the region, Thailand has opted to maintain a stance of strategic ambiguity. This ambivalence enables Thailand to craft and pursue various approaches based on its national interests without being constrained by formal alliances or rigid geopolitical commitments.

For instance, in the context of high-speed railway development, Thailand's government will refrain from overtly siding with Japan or China, both of which are significant players in this arena. Instead, Thailand evaluates which type of bilateral cooperation yields the most significant benefits to its national development goals. This pragmatic approach allows Thailand to leverage opportunities from multiple sources while avoiding the potential pitfall of being entangled in superpower rivalries.

Consequently, Thailand has neither issued an official position nor articulated a specific strategy in response to the IPEF. This strategic flexibility is a deliberate choice, reflecting Thailand's historical and ongoing preference for maintaining autonomy in foreign-policy decisions. By not explicitly committing to one side, Thailand preserves its ability to adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances and maximizes its national interests in a complex and competitive regional landscape.[57]

Although Thailand has not issued an official strategic plan specifically responding to Indo-Pacific strategies, it has nonetheless been actively

[56] Office of the National Security Council, "The National Security Policy and Plan (2023–2027)," 2023, 31. https://www.nsc.go.th/en/national-security-policy-and-plan-2023-2027/

[57] Narut Charoensri, "Reluctant Partnership: Thailand's Diplomacy in the Changing Regional Order," 2020. Paper presented at the First International Conference on Science, Economics and Society Studies, University of Economics and Finance, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, November 27, 2020.

engaged in the region's economic and political dynamics. In 2023, Thailand made a significant move by joining the IPEF. This decision was marked by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha's participation in an online event alongside leaders from the US, Japan, Australia, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Brunei.

Following this conference, an important document, the Statement on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, was released. The IPEF, spearheaded by the US and its allies, aims to establish a multilateral economic framework designed to promote shared economic interests and bolster co-operation among member countries. This initiative is expected to address contemporary challenges, such as pandemics, climate change, digital transformation, and supply-chain disruptions. Although the IPEF does not directly encompass security or political cooperation, Thailand's membership in this framework clearly indicates its strategic intent. By joining the IPEF, Thailand demonstrated a deliberate choice to avoid entangling itself in the political and security conflicts that characterize the Indo-Pacific region. Instead, Thailand viewed its participation in Indo-Pacific-related platforms as an economic opportunity.[58]

This strategic approach underscores Thailand's preference to leverage economic tools to navigate the complexities of regional geopolitics. By focusing on economic collaboration, Thailand aims to enhance its national development and address critical issues without drawing on power struggles between major global players. Thus, while Thailand maintains its stance on strategic ambiguity in the realms of security and political affairs, its engagement with the IPEF highlights a pragmatic and economically driven approach to the Indo-Pacific region. Compared with other regional initiatives that incorporate security dimensions, the Indo-Pacific strategies developed by many countries and international organizations tend to emphasize traditional security challenges more. These strategies often focus on issues such as military presence, defense alliances, and strategic deterrence. Thailand's approach is markedly different, prioritizing economic engagement and development over direct involvement in security matters.

Thailand's current responses to these challenges are encompassed in the NSPP. However, the NSPP has not explicitly addressed the evolving dynamics of the international order influenced by Indo-Pacific strategies. However, many Thai security agencies are aware of the significance of the Indo-Pacific region. These agencies have been working diligently to understand the dynamics, impacts, and implications of the Indo-Pacific strategies in Thailand.

The lack of a specific response to the IPEF highlights a key aspect of Thailand's approach to the region. Instead of adopting a proactive stance,

[58] Olivier Languepin, "Thailand Joins Indo-Pacific Framework with 12 Other Countries," Thailand Business News, February 8, 2023. https://www.thailand-business-news.com/taiwan/90301-thailand-joins-indo-pacific-framework-with-12-other-countries

Thailand appears to be more reactive, or even somewhat submissive, to the new and challenging international order presented by the Indo-Pacific configuration. Although other nations in the region have formulated explicit strategies to navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific Ocean, Thailand has adopted a more cautious approach. This caution reflects Thailand's broader foreign policy of maintaining flexibility and avoiding entanglement with geopolitical conflict. By not committing to a specific Indo-Pacific strategy, Thailand preserves its ability to adapt to changing circumstances and maintains its autonomy in decision-making.

However, this approach has certain drawbacks. Without a clear and proactive strategy, Thailand may be disadvantaged in terms of regional influences and economic opportunities. As the Indo-Pacific region becomes increasingly central to global geopolitics and economics, a well-defined strategy could help Thailand better navigate the associated challenges and leverage potential benefits. Therefore, while Thailand remains aware of the importance of the Indo-Pacific and associated security challenges, its current approach is characterized by a lack of explicit strategic direction. This reflects a broader tendency toward strategic ambiguity and flexibility, allowing Thailand to navigate the complexities of the international order while avoiding overt commitments. Nonetheless, as regional dynamics continue to evolve, Thailand may need to develop a more proactive and comprehensive strategy to effectively address the challenges and opportunities presented by the Indo-Pacific.

3.2 The Way Forward

In a contested, dynamic, and unpredictable international order, Thailand must prepare for emerging challenges and opportunities, and the Thai government agencies are currently addressing numerous questions to develop effective response strategies. While the fundamental question concerns the evolving international-polarity scenario, there appears to be a consensus among Thai government agencies that the international order is transitioning toward multipolarity. This recognition has led to subsequent questions regarding identifying major players in world politics and the strategies Thailand should adopt to appropriately respond to these changes.

Presently, the international order is dominated by the US liberal democratic order. However, over the past few decades, questions about alternative orders have gained traction. Thailand must carefully consider its position and navigate this dynamic landscape. Security issues arising from the Russia-Ukraine War, the situation in Myanmar, and other NTS threats necessitate thoroughly reconsidering Thai foreign policy. Considering the Indo-Pacific strategies endorsed by many value-oriented countries, Thailand

faces the challenge of manifesting its values on a global stage while maintaining balanced diplomatic relations.

The US, Japan, India, and Australia have leveraged their Indo-Pacific strategies to promote core values, such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, the principles that underlie the existing international order. Conversely, Thailand has not explicitly enunciated its foreign-policy values or principles, primarily because of the need to balance diplomatic relations with countries that adhere to different political and economic values and principles, such as China and Russia. This ambivalence in values and principles allows Thailand to maximize its national interests by seizing emerging opportunities.

As the IPEF continues to uphold its core principles and values, attracting like-minded countries that adhere to democratic ideals, Thailand must accordingly develop its national security plan. To assert strong advocacy in the global arena, Thailand should emphasize certain values and principles. These norms include a commitment to democracy, the rule of law, free and open economic and political values, and human rights. However, these commitments require Thailand to demonstrate a firm dedication to its foreign policy, particularly in addressing pressing humanitarian and ethical issues. For instance, Thailand must address humanitarian challenges along its border with Myanmar, manage the situation of undocumented cross-border workers, and combat illegal child labor in the fishery industry. Furthermore, Thailand must meet international standards for democratization.

Thailand can integrate these principles into the projects, mechanisms, and international platforms with which it engages. Thus, Thailand can reinforce its role as a responsible and principal member of the international community. For example, in addressing the humanitarian crisis at the Myanmar border, Thailand could collaborate with international organizations to provide aid and support to refugees while advocating for long-term solutions to political instability in Myanmar. In terms of undocumented cross-border workers, Thailand could develop policies that ensure their rights and protection, align with international labor standards, and demonstrate a commitment to human rights. Additionally, Thailand could implement stricter regulations and oversight in the fishery industry to eliminate illegal child labor, thereby upholding the rule of law and enhancing its reputation for protecting human rights.

To align with international democratization standards, Thailand should engage in comprehensive electoral reforms, promote civic education, and encourage political participation. By integrating these principles into its foreign policy and international engagement, Thailand can strengthen its global standing and contribute positively to regional and international stability.

This approach not only addresses immediate challenges but also aligns Thailand with broader international norms and values, reinforcing its commitment to a just and equitable global order.

To address these complex issues, the Office of the Council of National Security, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other security-related organizations must engage in serious discussions about Indo-Pacific strategies. Key discussion topics should include superpower competition scenarios and the values and principles underpinning Thailand's foreign policy. Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has emphasized that the country is now implementing the "Link-Lead Revive" strategy to maximize its national interests, which comprises several key components.

Strategic Positioning (Link): First, Thailand can leverage its strategic geographical location to play a leading role in the region. Situated at the center of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand is well positioned to link the subregions and serve as a bridge between South Asia and Northeast Asia. This geographic advantage enables Thailand to see itself as a bridge within Indo-Pacific strategies, facilitating regional connectivity and co-operation.

Regional Leadership (Lead): Second, using this linking strategy, Thailand aims to lead various regional initiatives, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, APEC, Asia Cooperation Dialogue, and IPEF. By taking a proactive role in these initiatives, Thailand seeks to enhance its regional influence and foster economic integration.

Humanitarian Assistance and Soft Power (Revive): Third, Thailand intends to play a proactive role in providing humanitarian assistance within the region, thereby enhancing its prominence and influence. Additionally, Thailand aims to increase its "soft power" through cultural diplomacy, build trust with global investors and trade partners, and improve its international image. This "reviving" role will help Thailand project a favorable and trustworthy image on the global stage.[59]

Thailand's strategy for navigating the complex Indo-Pacific region involves a balanced and multifaceted approach. By leveraging its strategic location, leading regional initiatives, and enhancing its soft power, Thailand aims to maximize its national interests while maintaining diplomatic flexibility. As the international order continues to evolve, Thailand must adapt and refine its strategies to remain relevant and influential in the global arena.

[59] Chalissas Suk-iem, "'Link-Lead-Revive': Cracking Thai Diplomatic Strategy under Maris Sa-ngiampongsa," Matichon Online, June 24, 2024. https://www.matichon.co.th/foreign/indepth/news_4655383

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entity the author represents.

I. Introduction: Risk and Threat to National Security

1.1 Key Threats to National Security

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, national security concerns extend beyond traditional military threats, encompassing a broader spectrum of issues that influence a nation's stability and prosperity. For Vietnam, which is situated in one of the most economically dynamic regions in the world, the perception and management of these risks are critical for ensuring sovereignty, economic growth, and social harmony. This report is an in-depth analysis of Vietnam's most pressing security challenges, examining their origins, implications, and potential mitigation strategies.

A complex interplay between regional and global dynamics shapes Vietnam's national security. The key threats and challenges include:

(i) Strategic competition among major powers: The current strategic competition among major powers, particularly between the US and China, can plunge the entire region into a Cold War-like situation. This affects Vietnam's foreign policies and defense strategies, which require a delicate balance to maintain autonomy while leveraging economic and security partnership opportunities. Therefore, Vietnam must navigate this competition to maximize cooperation benefits with both sides without entangling in conflicts.

(ii) Gray zone tactics in the South China Sea: China's use of gray zone tactics, such as the deployment of maritime militias, coast guard vessels, and artificial island-building in the South China Sea, threatens Vietnam's territorial integrity and economic interests. These tactics have created a persistent state of tension, challenged Vietnam's territorial claims, and exploited ambiguities in international law. Vietnam's response involves strengthening its maritime capabilities, enhancing surveillance, and pursuing diplomatic and legal measures to ensure its rights. Hence, this presents immediate risks and long-term strategic challenges that require a robust and multifaceted approach.

(iii) Climate change: Climate change poses significant risks to Vietnam, with rising sea levels, increased frequency of natural disasters, and changing weather patterns affecting agriculture, infrastructure, and overall socioeconomic stability. Vietnam's proactive measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change include investing in sustainable development, enhancing disaster preparedness, and participating in international climate agreements. Therefore, addressing climate change is a matter of national security and an opportunity for Vietnam to lead regional environmental initiatives and develop a green economy.

Understanding and addressing these threats requires viewing them in a dialectical relationship with opportunities since in each challenge lies the potential for strategic gain. For instance, strategic competition among major powers can enhance Vietnam's geopolitical significance and attract investment. Gray zone tactics in the South China Sea, while posing threats, support the modernization of Vietnam's defense capabilities and strengthen alliances with like-minded countries. Moreover, despite its adverse effects, climate change allows Vietnam to innovate green technologies and build resilience through sustainable practices.

Arguably, the current strategic competition among major powers, particularly between the US and China, has the most substantial long-term impact on Vietnam's security. This multifaceted phenomenon encompasses economic, technological, and military dimensions. Additionally, the ongoing trade disputes and the potential decoupling of supply chains have far-reaching implications for the global economy. As the two largest economies in the world, the trade policies and economic trajectories of the US and China significantly impact international trade flows and investment patterns. Competition for economic influence could lead to a fragmented global economic landscape, with countries increasingly aligning themselves with one of the two powers.

In the technology domain, the current power competition is intense. Both countries are vying for supremacy in cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), 5G networks, and quantum computing. This competition is driven by economic considerations and the recognition that these technologies will impact military capabilities and national security. Divergence in technology standards and ecosystems could result in a complex and divided digital landscape, with countries navigating competing technology spheres.

The military dimension of the US-China strategic competition is a concern for regional stability. As both nations strive to project influence and secure interests, increased military presence and activity in the region is inevitable. In particular, the South China Sea has become a ground for military show-off, with China enforcing its territorial and maritime claims and the US

conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). Heightened military activity in the region increases the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, which can have severe consequences for regional peace and stability.

As the US-China strategic competition intensifies, countries in the region may face increased pressure to choose sides. This could lead to a polarized regional landscape, with countries navigating competing economic, technological, and military interests. Moreover, competition can undermine regional cooperation and integration efforts as countries are incentivized to prioritize bilateral relationships with major powers over multilateral engagement. Strategic competition could divert resources and attention away from pressing regional challenges, such as climate change, poverty, and transnational crime. Addressing these challenges requires concerted effort and cooperation among all countries in the region, which may be challenging to achieve in a highly competitive geopolitical environment.

The use of gray zone tactics by some parties in the South China Sea has far-reaching implications[1] for countries in the region, including Vietnam. The South China Sea is a vital waterway for global trade, with an estimated one-third of the world's ship passing through its waters. It is rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and fisheries. The region's competing territorial claims and increasing militarization have made the sea a focal point for regional tensions and a potential flashpoint for conflict.

China's claims to the South China Sea, as outlined in its "nine-dash line," have been a concern for other claimants. China has asserted and enforced its claims through a combination of law enforcement and maritime militia, diplomatic pressures, economic coercion, and military presence. Over the past 10 years, it has engaged in large-scale land reclamation and construction activities on disputed islands and reefs, creating huge artificial islands for hosting military facilities and airstrips. These have altered the physical and strategic landscape of the region, making peaceful resolution of disputes difficult.

Using gray zone tactics in the South China Sea has significant implications for regional stability and the law. They challenge the integrity and effectiveness of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides a legal framework for resolving maritime disputes and ensuring the peaceful use of the world's oceans, highlighting the gaps in its enforcement mechanisms. The erosion of rule-based order in the region could lead to a volatile and unpredictable security environment, with countries increasingly relying on unilateral actions to protect their interests.[2] Therefore, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), signed in 2002 by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states and China, was an important step toward peacefully

[1] Michael J. Mazarr, "Mastering the gray zone: Understanding a changing era of conflict," US Army War College Press, 2015. https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/428

[2] Trang T. Ngo, "Grey zone conflict in the South China Sea and challenges," The Asia-Pacific Journal of International Humanitarian Law 1 (2021): 209–37. https://apjihl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/009-Grey-Zone-Ngo.pdf

managing disputes and preventing the escalation of tensions through cooperative measures. It represents a significant diplomatic effort to manage conflicts and maintain regional stability. However, its nonbinding nature and lack of concrete enforcement mechanisms limit its effectiveness, allowing for continued assertive actions that contravene its spirit.

Despite these limitations, the DOC has laid the groundwork for ongoing negotiations toward a comprehensive and binding Code of Conduct (COC). A robust and enforceable COC could reinforce the UNCLOS's principles and enhance regional cooperation, addressing the current challenges posed by gray zone tactics and restoring confidence in rule-based orders. The intersection of UNCLOS, DOC, and the ongoing COC efforts underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to maritime security in the South China Sea. Strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing diplomatic engagement, and building regional cooperation are essential steps toward mitigating the risks associated with gray zone activities. With these, the region can have a more stable and predictable security environment where disputes are resolved peacefully and international laws[3] are upheld. This collective effort will contribute to regional peace and stability, benefiting all parties involved.

Hence, the South China Sea dispute poses significant challenges to regional economies because its uncertainty and instability disrupt trade flows and investments in the region. The exploitation of natural resources, particularly oil and gas, could become more complex and expensive as claimant states assert their rights and protect their interests. Moreover, the use of gray zone tactics to enforce claims could strain diplomatic relationships among countries in the region, making it difficult to address other regional challenges and promote economic cooperation. To effectively resolve the South China Sea dispute and ensure long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in the region, responsible leadership from major powers is crucial. These countries must prioritize the common goals of regional and international peace, stability, and prosperity and work toward mutually acceptable solutions. All parties involved must uphold international law, particularly UNCLOS. Adherence to UNCLOS and other relevant international laws will build trust and promote a rule-based approach to addressing complex issues in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, claimant states must demonstrate goodwill and sincerity in negotiations to respect the legitimate interests of other nations. This requires a commitment to open dialogue, seeking mutual understanding, and compromising where necessary. By fostering an environment of trust and cooperation, claimant states can peacefully resolve disputes and prevent them from escalating into serious conflicts.

Climate change is a pressing threat to Vietnam's security as it has the potential to exacerbate tensions and create new challenges for Southeast

[3] Raymond Powell, "A South China Sea code of conduct cannot be built on a foundation of bad faith," The Diplomat, November 18, 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/a-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct-cannot-be-built-on-a-foundation-of-bad-faith/

Asian countries. Rising sea levels threaten the inundation of low-lying coastal areas, displacing communities and disrupting agriculture. Furthermore, changing rainfall patterns affect water availability and crop yield. The increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters, such as typhoons and floods, strain national resources and infrastructure. These environmental challenges threaten Vietnam's socioeconomic stability and pose significant risks to national security.

The Mekong River, which flows through six countries in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, is a vital source of water, food, and energy for millions of people. Rivers and their ecosystems are under increasing stress from climate change, with rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and sea-level rise contributing to an uncertain and unpredictable future. The Mekong's importance extends beyond Vietnam, impacting the water, energy, and food security of the entire region. Disruptions to the river's flow and health can lead to resource conflicts, affecting ASEAN's stability and potentially causing reverberations throughout the region. Therefore, addressing the impact of climate change on the Mekong subregion is crucial for maintaining regional security and ensuring sustainable development for all the countries that depend on its resources.

The impacts of climate change on the Mekong subregion are evident, with frequent and severe droughts, floods, and storms affecting the livelihoods and well-being of communities along the river. In recent years, the Mekong River has experienced record-low water levels, with drought conditions affecting agriculture, fisheries, and hydropower production. Rising sea levels and saltwater intrusion threaten the fertility of the Mekong Delta, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. These impacts will intensify in the coming decades as global temperatures rise and climate change becomes more pronounced. Therefore, the social and economic implications of climate change in the Mekong subregion are significant. The loss of agricultural productivity and decline in fisheries could lead to food insecurity and economic hardship for millions who depend on rivers for their livelihoods. The displacement of communities due to sea-level rise and other climate-related impacts could create new social and political tensions as people are forced to migrate to urban areas or across borders in search of better opportunities. Moreover, competition for increasingly scarce water resources could strain the relationships among countries in the region, particularly because upstream dams and water diversions affect downstream flows and exacerbate the impacts of climate change.

1.2 Other Threats to National Security

Transnational threats, such as regional and global pandemics, cyberattacks, supply chain disruptions, and socioeconomic disruptions caused by emerging

technologies, including AI, pose significant challenges to Vietnam's national security, economy, and social stability. Although these threats rank below traditional security concerns, albeit closely, they have a substantial potential for widespread harm. In particular, regional and global pandemics have underscored the vulnerabilities inherent in an interconnected world. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how quickly infectious diseases can spread across borders, overwhelming healthcare systems and disrupting economic activities.

Vietnam's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was commendable, characterized by early and decisive measures that effectively contained the virus. The country's public health strategy, which included widespread testing, contact tracing, and quarantine protocols, significantly mitigated the impact of the virus on its population.[4] Nevertheless, the pandemic inflicted considerable economic damage,[5] particularly on the tourism, manufacturing, and export sectors. The tourism industry, a significant contributor to Vietnam's gross domestic product, experienced a notable downturn owing to travel restrictions and reduced international mobility. Similarly, manufacturing and export activities faced disruptions due to global supply chain interruptions and decreased demands. Looking ahead, the potential for future pandemics remains a concern in Vietnam[6] and the broader region. The emergence of new pathogens and the increasing frequency of zoonotic diseases highlight the need for a robust public health infrastructure and international cooperation to combat future pandemics and biosecurity threats.

Cyberattacks are a rapidly escalating threat to Vietnam's national security and economic interests. As countries become digitally connected, they become increasingly susceptible to cyber threats, including hacking, malware, and espionage. These attacks can disrupt critical infrastructure, such as power grids, financial systems, and communication networks, leading to widespread economic and social disruptions. The theft of sensitive data from government and private sectors poses threats to national security and disrupts businesses. Additionally, such breaches can significantly undermine public trust in digital systems, which is essential for the modern digital economy.

In 2023, Vietnam experienced approximately 14,000 cyberattacks on various systems.[7] For example, two significant incidents involved VNDirect and PVOil.[8] These attacks severely affected their operations, highlighting the vulnerability of high-security sectors, such as finance and energy. These attacks were primarily made by external hackers and underscore the need for improved cybersecurity measures and awareness among Vietnamese enterprises, emphasizing that such incidents are the tip of the iceberg.

[4] Era Dabla-Norris and Yuanyan Sophia Zhang, "Vietnam: Successfully navigating the pandemic," IMF, March 10, 2021. https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/03/09/na031021-vietnam-successfully-navigating-the-pandemic

[5] PricewaterhouseCoopers, "COVID-19 impact assessment: Analysis of the potential impacts of COVID-19 on Vietnamese economy," PwC Vietnam, 2020. https://www.pwc.com/vn/en/publications/vietnam-publications/economy-covid19.html

[6] PricewaterhouseCoopers, "Vietnam outlook 2022: Economic prospects in the wake of COVID-19," PwC Vietnam, 2022. https://www.pwc.com/vn/en/publications/vietnam-publications/220221-pwc-vietnam-outlook-en.html

[7] An Khánh, "Nearly 14,000 cyberattacks targeted systems in Vietnam in one year," Lao Động, March 30, 2024. https://laodong.vn/cong-nghe/gan-14000-vu-tan-cong-mang-nham-vao-cac-he-thong-tai-viet-nam-trong-mot-nam-1321384.ldo

[8] Mạnh Chung, "Consecutive cyberattacks on Vietnamese businesses: 'Just the tip of the iceberg'," VnEconomy, April 5, 2024. https://vneconomy.vn/lien-tiep-cac-vu-tan-cong-mang-vao-doanh-nghiep-viet-chi-la-phan-noi-cua-tang-bang.htm

The impact of cyberattacks on Vietnam is multifaceted and profound. The disruption of critical infrastructure can result in immediate and long-term economic losses, affecting everything, from daily business operations to national economic stability. Cyber espionage can lead to the loss of confidential information, compromising national defense strategies and diplomatic relationships. Moreover, the erosion of public trust in digital systems can impede the adoption of digital technologies, slowing down the country's progress in digital transformation. Hence, cyberattacks pose a significant threat[9] to Vietnam's continued development and stability in an increasingly interconnected world.

The socioeconomic disruption caused by emerging technologies, including AI, poses a significant threat to Vietnam's national security and social stability. The rapid development and deployment of AI and other advanced technologies profoundly change labor markets, potentially displacing workers and creating unemployment in specific sectors. Automation and AI-driven processes can replace traditional jobs, particularly in manufacturing and low-skilled services, which are critical to the Vietnamese economy. This shift could exacerbate existing social inequalities as those with higher education and technical skills are more likely to benefit from new opportunities while others may struggle to adapt. Moreover, integrating AI and emerging technologies into critical infrastructures and systems introduces new vulnerabilities. Cybersecurity risks are amplified as these technologies become integral to essential services, such as healthcare, transportation, and energy. The complexity and interconnectivity of AI systems can lead to unforeseen failures or targeted cyberattacks, causing widespread disruption. Additionally, using AI in decision-making processes raises ethical concerns, including algorithm biases and the potential misuse of personal data, undermining public trust and social cohesion.

The potential impacts of these disruptions are far-reaching. Social instability may arise from increased unemployment and widening economic disparities, leading to civil unrest and strain on the social welfare system. Economic disruption can hinder Vietnam's growth and competitiveness as industries struggle to keep pace with technological advancements. Furthermore, ethical and legal challenges surrounding AI use and emerging technologies require careful consideration to ensure responsible development and deployment. Although emerging technologies offer significant benefits, their potential to disrupt socioeconomic structures poses a critical challenge to Vietnam's stability and security.

1.3 Identification and Prioritization

Identifying and ranking security issues in Vietnam is a complex process influenced by internal assessments and external factors. The nature of threats

[9] PricewaterhouseCoopers, "2022 global digital trust insights survey: Vietnam report," PwC Vietnam, 2022. https://www.pwc.com/vn/en/publications/vietnam-publications/digital-trust-insights-2022.html

can vary significantly, encompassing traditional military concerns, non-traditional security challenges, and socioeconomic disruptions. According to the comprehensive security approach outlined in the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the highest priority is safeguarding national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the political regime.[10] This holistic perspective integrates human security and intersectoral cooperation, recognizing the multifaceted nature of contemporary security threats.

Strategic competition among major powers, notably the US and China, is considered a significant long-term challenge. This competition manifests in the economic, technological, and military arenas, which affect global trade, technology standards, and regional stability. Vietnam must carefully navigate this rivalry to maintain its autonomy and leverage opportunities for economic growth and technological advancement. Furthermore, competition poses risks to regional security architecture, requiring Vietnam to bolster its diplomatic and defensive strategies. The South China Sea dispute remains a critical concern because of its direct impact on Vietnam's territorial integrity and socioeconomic well-being. The use of gray zone tactics and assertive actions in disputed waters challenges Vietnam's maritime claims and threatens its fishing and energy resources. Upholding the UNCLOS principles, pursuing cooperative measures, such as the DOC, and working toward a legally binding COC are essential for managing these disputes and maintaining regional stability.

The impacts of climate change, particularly in the Mekong subregion, represent a pressing security issue. The Mekong River is crucial for the water security, energy production, and food supply of the people in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. Rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and sea-level rise exacerbate existing environmental stresses, leading to frequent and severe droughts and floods. These changes threaten agricultural productivity, energy infrastructure, and socioeconomic stability. Addressing climate change and its impacts on the Mekong subregion requires regional cooperation and sustainable management practices to ensure the long-term security and prosperity of all the nations that rely on its resources.

Moreover, non-traditional threats, such as pandemics, cyberattacks, and socioeconomic disruptions caused by emerging technologies, are increasingly recognized as significant risks. The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified the vulnerability of interconnected economies and highlighted the need for robust public health infrastructure and international cooperation. As Vietnam becomes digitally connected, cyber threats pose risks to critical infrastructure and data security, undermining national security and economic stability. The rapid advancement of technologies has raised concerns about labor market disruptions, social inequalities, and new

[10] Communist Review, "The 13th National Party Congress resolution," August 25, 2021. https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/english/focus/detail/-/asset_publisher/FMhwM2oQCZEZ/content/the-13th-national-party-congress-resolution

vulnerabilities in critical systems. Vietnam's policy documents, including the 2019 National Defense White Paper and the 13th Party Congress documents, have noted several threats, risks, and challenges to national security. Together, these documents articulate the strategic context and defense approach that shape Vietnam's approach to national security. For instance, the 2019 National Defense White Paper noted that strategic competition among the major powers, ensuring maritime security and climate change, are significant challenges. It emphasized the importance of addressing non-traditional security issues, such as cyber threats, terrorism, and transnational crimes, in collaboration with international partners.

Furthermore, documents from the 13th Party Congress and other state publications[11] reinforce these priorities by aligning national defense strategies with socioeconomic development goals. They underscore the necessity of integrating defense and security considerations into all aspects of national planning, from economic development to technological innovation. This comprehensive approach will enhance Vietnam's resilience against varied threats while promoting sustainable growth and stability.

1.4 Discussion

Public and professional discussions on risk and threat perception in Vietnam are ongoing and multifaceted. Academic institutions, think tanks, and policy forums regularly discuss these issues and contribute to the dynamic discourse on national security. The media plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding and awareness of security threats.[12] Discussions often focus on the implications of geopolitical shifts, the effectiveness of national defense strategies, and the challenges posed by emerging technologies and non-traditional threats.

In recent years, the discourse has increasingly highlighted the importance of the cyber domain and the potential socioeconomic impacts of AI and automation. These discussions reflect the growing recognition of the interconnected nature of modern security challenges and the need for a holistic and adaptive approach to threat management. The Vietnamese government's proactive stance in addressing these issues through strategic policies and international cooperation underscores its commitment to safeguarding national security in a rapidly evolving global context. For instance, in 2021, it released a national development strategy on AI until 2030 to make the country a leader in AI applications.

[11] Communist Party of Vietnam, "Resolution dated February 01, 2022 on the 13th National Congress Khongso, Nghị Quyết Khongso 2022," LawNet, January 2, 2022. https://www.lawnet.vn/en/vb/Resolution-2022-13th-National-Congress-7D534.html

[12] Douglas M. McLeod and Dhavan V. Shah, "News frames and national security: Covering Big Brother," Cambridge University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfv044

1.5 Risk and Threat Perception Over Time

Risk and threat perceptions in Vietnam have evolved over the past decades and have been shaped by several factors, including domestic development and international dynamics. The end of the Cold War, regional economic integration, and the rise of new security challenges have influenced Vietnam's security outlook. Historically focusing on conventional military threats, Vietnam's security strategy has broadened to include a wide array of non-traditional threats, reflecting the changing nature of global and regional security environments.

This evolution in perception can be attributed to Vietnam's expansive view of security, which has become increasingly comprehensive and encompasses human security. This broader perspective acknowledges that security is not solely defined by military strength, instead includes the well-being and resilience of the population. Public health, economic stability, food security, and environmental sustainability are integral to Vietnam's security. By adopting this holistic approach, it is better equipped to address the multifaceted nature of contemporary threats, ensuring a stable and prosperous future for its citizens, while contributing to regional and global stability. This comprehensive security framework underscores its commitment to safeguarding national interests through a balanced and inclusive strategy that addresses traditional and non-traditional threats.

The strategic competition between the US and China, and increasingly between the US and Russia due to the Ukraine conflict, has heightened Vietnam's awareness of geopolitical risks and the need for strategic autonomy. The increasing frequency of cyberattacks and the transformative potential of emerging technologies have shifted the focus toward cybersecurity and technological resilience. Additionally, the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation have become more prominent, particularly in the Mekong Delta and coastal regions. Overall, Vietnam's risk and threat perceptions are characterized by high adaptability, with it responding to emerging challenges while maintaining a strong focus on traditional security concerns.

II. Analysis of Key Issues and Current Perception

2.1 Major Power Competition

The issue of major power competition, particularly between the US and China, is deeply embedded in the geopolitical and economic transformations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. After the Cold War, the US emerged as the sole superpower, with unparalleled economic and military dominance. During the 1990s and the early 2000s, China, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and his successors, embarked on a path of economic reform, which led to unprecedented economic growth.[13] This period saw China becoming more integrated into the global economy, marked by its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. China's rapid economic rise shifted global power dynamics, challenging the unipolarity that characterized the post-Cold War order.

As China's economic power grew, so did its ambitions and capabilities. The 2008 global financial crisis further accelerated this shift, as China emerged relatively unscathed while the US and other Western economies struggled. China's growing confidence was evident in its active foreign policies and military modernization efforts. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 symbolized China's ambition to expand its global influence through infrastructure investments and economic partnerships. Consequently, the US[14] increasingly perceived China as a competitor and a potential rival that could challenge its global hegemony. This perception was partially caused by the US pivoting to Asia during the Obama administration to strengthen alliances and increase its military presence in the Asia-Pacific.

The strategic rivalry between the US and China has become a defining feature of global geopolitics, encompassing economic, technological, military, and ideological dimensions. This competition has significantly influenced the policies and strategies of various nations, including Vietnam. The evolution of this major power competition has been marked by increasing tension and strategic maneuvers. In the economic domain, the US-China trade war, initiated under the Trump administration, intensified competition. Tariffs and sanctions became tools of economic warfare to curtail China's technological advancement and reduce trade imbalances.[15] Technological competition intensified, particularly in fields, such as 5G networks, AI, and quantum computing. The US sought to limit China's access to cutting-edge technologies by employing the "small yard, high fence" strategy, fearing that Chinese technological advancements could translate into military superiority and economic dominance.[16] This competition bifurcated global technology standards and supply chains, with countries

[13] Khalid Manzoor Butt and Sarah Sajid, "Chinese economy under Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping," Journal of Political Studies 25 (2018): 169–78. www.researchgate.net/publication/\333816253_Chinese_Economy_under_Mao_Zedong_and_Deng_Xiaoping

[14] Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Strategic competition and US-China relations: A conceptual analysis," The Chinese Journal of International Politics 16(3) (2023): 333–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008

[15] Anton Kristoff and Adrian Wu, "The US-China trade war heats up," Project Syndicate, June 5, 2024. www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-us-china-trade-war-heats-up

[16] Cameron Cavanagh, "U.S. economic restrictions on China: Small yard, high fence?" Georgetown Security Studies Review, December 26, 2023. https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2023/12/26/u-s-economic-restrictions-on-china-small-yard-high-fence/

and companies often pressurized to align with either the US or Chinese systems.

The current power competition between the two countries is characterized by a complex and multifaceted interplay of cooperation, competition, and confrontation. Despite the ongoing economic interdependence, strategic distrust remains high, fueled by divergent geopolitical interests and ideological differences. The Biden administration has largely maintained its predecessor's policies, emphasizing the need to counter China's growing influence while engaging in dialogue on issues of mutual concern, such as climate change and global health.[17] This reflects the importance of managing the relationship with China, which is both a strategic competitor and a potential partner in addressing global challenges. However, the underlying tensions and rivalries between the two powers continue to simmer, with both sides seeking to protect and advance their national interests in an increasingly complex and uncertain international environment.

Military tensions between the US and China are particularly palpable in the Indo-Pacific region, with the South China Sea as the focal point. China's territorial claims and ongoing militarization in the region have prompted robust responses from the US and its allies who view these actions as threats to regional stability and FONOPs.[18] The US sought to counter China's influence by strengthening its regional alliances and partnerships, conducting joint military exercises, and increasing its naval presence. Beyond the military, the competition extends to international institutions and norms, with both sides seeking to shape global governance structures that reflect their interests and values. China has sought to increase its influence through initiatives, such as the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, while the US has sought to rally its allies and partners to uphold rules-based international orders. This evolving dynamic suggests that power competition will remain a defining feature of international relationships in the coming years, with far-reaching implications for global stability, economic prosperity, and the geopolitical balance of power.

This power competition has received much attention in Vietnamese media. The government frequently addresses this issue in strategic documents and official statements, reflecting its importance for national security and economic policy. For instance, the 2019 National Defense White Paper highlighted the significance of strategic competition and its implications for Vietnam's security environment. This underscores the necessity of navigating a complex geopolitical landscape in which Vietnam must balance its relationships with both powers while safeguarding its sovereignty and national interests. Simultaneously, news outlets regularly cover developments related to trade tensions, military activities in the South China Sea, and diplomatic engagement. These topics are often analyzed in

[17] Evan S. Medeiros, "The new domestic politics of US-China relations," Asia Society Policy Institute, December 7, 2023. https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/new-domestic-politics-us-china-relations

[18] Jihyun Kim, "Territorial disputes in the South China Sea: Implications for security in Asia and beyond," Strategic Studies Quarterly 9(2) (2015): 107–41.

terms of their potential effects on Vietnam's economy, security, and foreign policy. Popular debate, particularly on social media sites, such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, reflects public interest and concern about how this power competition influences everyday life. This widespread attention indicates a high level of public awareness of and engagement with the issue, which is crucial for Vietnam's stability and prosperity.

In this context, Vietnam has garnered various responses to the BRI. Many recognize the potential economic benefits of BRI participation, including enhanced infrastructure and increased investment. Vietnam's strategic geographic position makes it a natural partner in the initiative's goal to improve regional connectivity and trade networks. Its approach to the BRI has been characterized by careful evaluation and selective engagement. This stance aligns with the country's broader economic and foreign-policy objectives, which prioritize balanced international relationships and sustainable development. Policymakers are interested in collaborating on projects that complement national development plans while maintaining diverse international partnerships. This nuanced approach reflects Vietnam's efforts to navigate the complex economic and geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia by balancing potential opportunities from the BRI with strategic autonomy and diversified economic ties.

However, the level of attention to the power competition has increased over time in Vietnam. During the immediate post-Cold War era, the focus was primarily on economic development and integration into the global economy, with less emphasis on geopolitical rivalries. Nonetheless, as China's economic and military capabilities grew and the US asserted its presence more strongly in the Asia-Pacific region, the perception of a major power competition became more pronounced. This shift was particularly evident during the 2010s as tensions in the South China Sea escalated and trade conflicts between the US and China intensified. In recent years, the attention has increased owing to several developments. The Trump-initiated trade war against China and the strategic competition in the technological and military domains have brought this issue to the forefront. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities and dependencies in global supply chains, further underscoring the strategic importance of major power dynamics. The 2019 National Defense White Paper reflected this heightened attention, detailing the strategic context and emphasizing the need for Vietnam to navigate these challenges. The evolving nature of these threats and their direct implications for Vietnam's security and economic interests have ensured that power competition remains a central concern.

The risk perceptions of the power competition are widely shared in Vietnam. Those in government or policymaking circles adopt a balanced approach, emphasizing the importance of maintaining stable, healthy, and harmonious relationships with both the US and China. This is evident from

Vietnam's foreign policy, which leverages economic opportunities while safeguarding national sovereignty and security. Official documents, such as the 2019 National Defense White Paper and the 13th Party Congress resolution, articulate this balanced strategy, highlighting the need to enhance defense capabilities while promoting international cooperation and dialogue. Security experts and academic circles provide a nuanced analysis of the strategic implications of the competition for regional stability and national security. They emphasize the need for Vietnam to strengthen its defense posture and diversify its international partnerships to mitigate the risks associated with major power competition.[19]

The power competition intersects with several significant policy discussions in Vietnam. The key questions revolve around economic dependency and diversification. As strategic competition intensifies, Vietnam faces the challenge of balancing its economic ties with both countries. The trade war has highlighted vulnerabilities in the global supply chains,[20] which has prompted discussions on how Vietnam can diversify its trade partnerships and reduce its dependency on a single market.[21] Another related discussion focuses on regional security and defense strategies. The South China Sea, a critical maritime region for Vietnam, is a potential hotspot for military and geopolitical tension. Vietnam's stance on sovereignty claims and the efforts to strengthen its maritime defense capabilities have been continuously discussed and assessed in the context of this power competition. The implications for ASEAN's cohesion and regional security frameworks form a part of this broader discussion as Vietnam advocates a rule-based order and multilateral approaches to conflict resolution.

The risk posed by the power competition is expected to remain significant in the near future, with strategic rivalry showing little signs of abatement. This contest spans the economic, technological, and military dimensions, each with profound implications for regional stability. Both superpowers have intensified their engagement and defended their interests, leading to a complex geopolitical landscape. Their actions and policies reverberate throughout the region, particularly in the South China Sea, where tensions are anticipated to remain heightened. China's assertive territorial claims and militarization have raised concerns among neighboring countries and the international community. In response, the US persists with FONOPs and bolsters its military presence to counter China's influence and uphold international laws. This dynamic could result in increased militarization and a heightened risk of confrontation as both powers assert their dominance in this strategically critical area.

The economic dimension of the competition is likely to have significant regional implications. The ongoing trade disputes and technological competition have led to economic decoupling as companies diversify their supply chains to reduce their dependence on China. This is expected to continue,

[19] Trinh Viet Dung and Dieu Huyen Ho, "Vietnam's Response to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Context of a Rising China," Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 43(1) (2024): 120-147. https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034241237813

[20] Yi Huang, Lin Chen, Sibo Liu, and Heiwai Tang, "Supply chain linkages and financial markets: Evaluating the costs of the US-China trade war," In M. A. Crowley (Ed.), Trade war: The clash of economic systems endangering global prosperity, CEPR Press, 2019, 65–72. https://cepr.org/system/files/publication-files/60137-trade_war_the_clash_of_economic_systems_threatening_global_prosperity.pdf

[21] Duc Anh Dang and Ngoc Anh Tran, "The effects of the United States-China trade war during the COVID-19 pandemic on global supply chains: Evidence from Viet Nam," ERIA Discussion Paper Series No. 483, August 29, 2023. https://www.eria.org/publications/the-effects-of-the-united-stateschina-trade-war-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-global-supply-chains-evidence-from-viet-nam

potentially reshaping regional economic ties and presenting challenges and opportunities for countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Intensifying technological competition, especially in 5G networks, AI, and semiconductor production, further complicates the economic landscape and has geopolitical ramifications. As the US-China rivalry evolves, the fluidity and unpredictability of international relationships pose challenges for the region. The risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation remains significant as both powers safeguard their interests and respond to perceived threats.

This competition may spill over into other domains, such as cyberspace, outer space, and the governance of global commons, further complicating the geopolitical picture. Therefore, regional actors must carefully monitor development, engage in proactive diplomacy, and strive to maintain stability and prosperity amid the evolving landscape of power competition. The future of the Asia-Pacific region will be shaped by the intricate interplay of US-China competition and the strategic responses of regional states to this geopolitical challenge.

2.2 Gray Zone Tactics in the South China Sea

The issue of gray zone tactics in the South China Sea dispute emerged from long-standing territorial and maritime claims by multiple countries, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Historically, the South China Sea has been a critical region for trade and strategic military positioning, leading to competing claims. China's claim, delineated by the "nine-dash line," encompasses a significant portion of the sea and overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones of several Southeast Asian countries. The discovery of vast natural resources, including oil and gas reserves, has intensified these territorial disputes.

One of the earliest notable incidents occurred in 1974 when the Paracel Islands were wrested from the Saigon regime. This confrontation resulted in a naval battle that led to the establishment of Chinese control over the Paracels. This remains a point of contention as Vietnam has never relinquished its claims of sovereignty over the islands. The situation in the South China Sea heated up again in 1988 with the Johnson South Reef skirmish on the Spratly Islands. This involved a deadly confrontation, resulting in the deaths of several Vietnamese sailors and the sinking of Vietnamese vessels. Subsequently, China established its presence on the reef, giving it a foothold on the Spratly Islands. This highlighted China's willingness to use force to assert its territorial claims and strained the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The 2014 oil rig crisis marked another critical point in the South China Sea dispute. In May 2014, China deployed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig in the waters claimed by Vietnam near the Paracel Islands.

This led to a tense standoff between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels, with numerous incidents of ramming and water cannon attacks. The deployment of the oil rig sparked widespread protests in Vietnam and severely strained bilateral relationships. A year before the oil rig crisis, the Philippines brought a case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), seeking a ruling on the legality of China's claims and actions in the South China Sea. In 2016, the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, stating that China's "nine-dash line" had no legal basis under the UNCLOS. Moreover, the Tribunal found that China's land reclamation activities caused severe environmental damage. However, China rejected the PCA's decision and maintained its claim.

The ongoing dispute is complicated by frequent incidents involving fishing vessels and coastal guards from various claimant countries. Chinese coastal guards, naval militias, fishing vessels, and other maritime forces have been accused of harassing and intimidating vessels of other nations. These actions are part of China's broader strategy of asserting control over the region through a combination of military presence, economic activities, and administrative measures. Currently, the South China Sea remains a highly contentious and militarized region. Despite international rule and regional protests, the continued construction and militarization of artificial islands by various parties have significantly altered its strategic landscape. Efforts to negotiate a COC between ASEAN countries and China have seen limited progress, reflecting the complexities and competing interests involved in the negotiations. The international community, particularly the US, continues to challenge China's claims through FONOPs and diplomatic efforts, advocating a rule-based order and peaceful resolution of disputes. However, the situation remains volatile, with the possibility of further escalation and significant regional and global security implications.

The tension surrounding the South China Sea has received significant attention in Vietnamese politics. The government's strategic documents, including the 2019 National Defense White Paper, frequently addressed the importance of safeguarding sovereignty and maintaining peace, security, FONOPs, and overflight. These topics are central to Vietnam's defense and foreign policy, emphasizing the need for diplomatic efforts, regional cooperation, and enhancing national defense capabilities to counteract the coercive actions of other states. Moreover, the South China Sea dispute has been a prominent subject of media coverage and analysis. The Vietnamese media regularly report incidents involving vessels of various countries in the region and developments in regional diplomacy, such as ASEAN's efforts to negotiate a COC with China. These reports are crucial in shaping public perception and awareness of ongoing territorial disputes and their impact on national security. Public debates, which are often facilitated by social media sites and online platforms, reflect widespread concern over sovereignty issues and the potential economic impact of maritime conflicts.

The population is highly engaged, frequently discussing the historical contexts of the disputes and expressing support for the government's stance on defending national interests. Some view FONOPs as deterrents to unilateral actions that can disrupt the balance of power and threaten international maritime law. This perspective is aligned with Vietnam's broader strategy of leveraging international law to counterbalance the assertive actions of other regional actors.[22] Analysts maintain that these operations have profound implications for regional geopolitics and global trade.[23]

In recent years, attention has intensified owing to China's expanding presence and activities in the South China Sea. The 2014 oil rig crisis marked a significant escalation and drew widespread media coverage and public protests in Vietnam. Over time, the increasing frequency of incidents and China's assertive actions in the region have made the South China Sea dispute a central topic in Vietnamese political discourse and public debate. Risk perceptions regarding the South China Sea are similar among various Vietnamese stakeholders. The government has consistently emphasized a balanced approach that combines diplomatic efforts, regional cooperation, and military preparedness. Its strategy involves safeguarding its sovereignty and national interests while avoiding direct military confrontation. This approach is based on a comprehensive understanding of geopolitical dynamics and prioritizing regional stability.

However, the gray zone tactics significantly threaten regional stability and adherence to international maritime law.[24] Vietnam perceives the use of gray zone tactics as a deliberate strategy to alter the status quo in the South China Sea without provoking a full-scale military conflict. These actions are attempts to incrementally change facts on the ground (or at sea) and undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations. Vietnam views these tactics as a violation of international law, particularly the UNCLOS,[25] which provides a legal framework for maritime activities and territorial claims. The Vietnamese government has consistently emphasized the importance of adhering to the UNCLOS and other international norms. This is evident in Vietnam's active participation in regional forums and efforts to rally support from the international community for a rule-based order in the South China Sea. In a recent statement, Vietnam reiterated the need for all parties to respect the 1982 UNCLOS for maritime activities. It considers this legal framework essential for maintaining peace, stability, and cooperation in the region.[26]

Foreign-policy experts and academics have analyzed the strategic implications of the disputes. They highlight the complexities of regional power dynamics, the role of international law, and the importance of multilateral frameworks, such as ASEAN, in managing conflicts. Moreover, they advocate for building strong regional alliances and enhancing maritime capabilities to deter coercive action by other states.

[22] Bienphong, "The importance of exercising maritime rights and freedom in the South China Sea," January 21, 2022. https://www.bienphong.com.vn/tam-quan-trong-cua-viec-thuc-hien-quyen-va-tu-do-hang-hai-o-bien-dong-post447604.html

[23] Vietnam News Agency, "Freedom of navigation in the South China Sea," July 30, 2024. https://vietnam.vnanet.vn/vietnamese/long-form/tu-do-hang-hai-tren-bien-dong-343073.html

[24] Nhandan.vn, "The Red Sea maritime crisis," February 2, 2024. https://nhandan.vn/cuoc-khung-hoang-hang-hai-tren-bien-do-post794863.html

[25] Vupc.monre.gov.vn, "40 years of development of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and Vietnam's active participation," April 19, 2023. https://vupc.monre.gov.vn/linh-vuc-bien-va-hai-dao/5450/40-nam-phat-trien-cong-uoc-luat-bien-cua-lien-hop-quoc-va-su-tham-gia-tich-cuc-cua-viet-nam

[26] Biengioilanhtho.gov.vn, "Countries need to comply with the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea in activities at sea," September 6, 2023. http://biengioilanhtho.gov.vn/vi/tin-tuc/cac-nuoc-can-tuan-thu-cong-uoc-luat-bien-nam-1982-trong-cac-hoat-dong-tren-bien-1089213.html

However, journalists and media commentators focus on specific incidents and their immediate impacts, providing detailed reports and analyses that shape public perception. Overall, there is a strong consensus regarding defending national sovereignty and maintaining a strategic and long-term orientation, focusing on stability and diplomatic engagement.

The South China Sea dispute is intricately linked to broader discussions on regional security and international maritime law, particularly the role of the UNCLOS. The 2016 ruling by the PCA rejected China's claim to historic waters within the "nine-dash line," arguing that the UNCLOS should be the cornerstone of a rules-based maritime order. This sparked ongoing discussions about how to defend and strengthen international law to ensure compliance by all nations. The challenge lies in effectively binding the actions of stronger powers to international norms.

The risk posed by the South China Sea dispute will remain significant and could increase nonlinearly in the coming years. China's assertive behavior in recent maritime incidents with the Philippines suggests that tensions will continue to persist. These actions underscore the strategic importance of the South China Sea, which serves as a major shipping route and a resource-rich area. The region's vast oil and natural gas reserves, and its abundant fisheries,[27] further complicate the geopolitical landscape as claimant states secure access to these valuable resources. This intractable situation necessitates ongoing vigilance and suitable responses from other claimant states, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and the broader international community.

The complex nature of the South China Sea dispute, with multiple overlapping territorial and maritime claims and the involvement of regional and external powers, creates a challenging environment for conflict resolution. China's assertion of its "nine-dash line" claim, which encompasses a vast majority of the South China Sea, directly conflicts with the claims of other states in the region, leading to increased tension and incidents. Moreover, the US's involvement in the dispute, driven by its strategic interest in maintaining FONOPs and countering China's growing influence, adds a layer of complexity to the situation. The risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation is heightened by the presence of multiple actors[28] with competing interests and the increasing frequency of military activity in the region.

However, expectations for the near future include sustained diplomatic efforts to manage and mitigate conflict. ASEAN has been actively negotiating with China to establish a COC for the South China Sea. A robust and enforceable COC will reduce the risk of miscalculation and promote peaceful resolution by providing a framework for dialogue, confidence-building, and dispute settlement. However, progress has been slower than

[27] US Energy Information Administration, "Independent statistics and analysis," March 21, 2024. https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea

[28] Liam Reeves, "The South China Sea disputes: Territorial and maritime differences between the Philippines and China," Journal of Global Faultlines 6(1) (2019): 39–61. https://doi.org/10.13169/jglobfaul.6.1.0039

hoped[29] since the differing interests of ASEAN and China pose challenges in achieving a comprehensive agreement. Some ASEAN states have closer economic and political ties with China, which may influence their negotiation position. In addition, China's preference for bilateral negotiations and its reluctance to accept legally binding provisions in the COC could hinder the effectiveness of the agreement in addressing the underlying sources of tension.

International support for orders based on international law is essential to effectively manage the risks posed by the South China Sea dispute. This support can manifest through diplomatic pressure on claimant states to adhere to international law, economic sanctions against actors who violate these norms, and a coordinated military presence to ensure that FONOPs and overflight rights are respected. FONOPs can challenge excessive maritime claims and reaffirm the international law governing the use of the seas. However, it is important to balance deterrence and strategic reassurance to avoid unintended escalations. Engaging China through multilateral forums, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, can build trust and promote dialogue on maritime security issues. Overall, although the risk posed by the South China Sea dispute is likely to persist, a combination of diplomatic engagement, adherence to international norms, strategic reassurance, and deterrence can prevent its escalation and maintain regional peace and stability in the face of this complex geopolitical challenge.

2.3 Climate Change

Climate change has emerged as a significant threat to Vietnam's national security, with far-reaching implications for its socioeconomic stability, environmental sustainability, and regional cooperation. As a country with a long coastline, a significant portion of its population and economic activities are concentrated in low-lying areas.[30] Hence, Vietnam is particularly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change.

The Mekong subregion, which encompasses Vietnam and its neighboring countries, is susceptible to the impacts of climate change owing to its unique ecological and socioeconomic characteristics. The Mekong River is a vital water source in the region and supports the livelihood of millions through agriculture, fisheries, and energy production. However, rivers and their ecosystems are increasingly stressed by climate change,[31] which has exacerbated existing environmental challenges and introduced new threats. In the Mekong subregion, rising temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, and sea-level rise have led to frequent and severe droughts, floods, and storms. These extreme weather events have disrupted agricultural production and fisheries, damaged crops and infrastructure, and displaced communities,

[29] Ian Storey, "The code of conduct for the South China Sea: Movement in lieu of progress," Fulcrum, July 20, 2023. https://www.fulcrum.sg/the-code-of-conduct-for-the-south-china-sea-movement-in-lieu-of-progress/

[30] Asian Development Bank, "Viet Nam: Environment and climate change assessment," 2013. https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/33916/files/viet-nam-environment-climate-change.pdf

[31] World Bank Group and Asian Development Bank, "Climate risk country profile: Vietnam," 2021. https://www.climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/15077-Vietnam%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf

leading to increased migration and social tension. For instance, the 2019 drought in the Mekong Delta caused saltwater intrusion to extend inland, affecting over 50,000 ha of rice paddies and leaving farmers without a stable income. According to the Vietnam Country Climate and Development Report released by the World Bank in 2022, Vietnam lost approximately $10 billion (3.2% of its GDP) in 2020 because of climate change.[32] The broader economic impacts of climate change in Vietnam include damage to infrastructure, loss of productivity, and increased disaster-response and mitigation costs. The Vietnamese government has reported that climate-related disasters, such as typhoons and floods, have caused annual economic losses equivalent to 1–1.5% of the country's GDP.[33] These figures underscore the profound economic strain that climate change places on Vietnam.

Moreover, climate change has affected the unique biodiversity of the region, with rising water temperatures and altered flow patterns threatening the survival of aquatic species, including the iconic Mekong giant catfish. The loss of biodiversity has ecological consequences and affects the livelihoods and cultural heritage of communities that depend on these resources. Recognizing the critical importance of addressing climate change and its impact on the Mekong subregion, Vietnam has actively engaged in regional cooperative initiatives and promoted sustainable development practices. However, effectively tackling this complex challenge requires concerted efforts from all countries in the region and international support.

The impact of climate change on the Mekong subregion has been compounded by human activities, particularly the construction of upstream dams and water diversions. These projects,[34] driven by the growing energy demands of the rapidly developing economies of the region, have altered the natural flow of rivers, reduced sediment transport, and affected fish migration patterns. The resulting water availability and quality changes have had cascading effects on downstream communities, exacerbating the challenges posed by climate change. The cumulative impact of these dams, combined with the effects of climate change, poses difficulties for the long-term sustainability of the region's ecosystems and related livelihoods.

The current state of the Mekong subregion highlights the urgent need to address climate change and its multifaceted impacts. Vietnam, particularly the Mekong Delta, is one of the most vulnerable regions because of its low elevation and extensive reliance on agriculture. The delta is home to over 20 million people and produces more than half of Vietnam's rice output. It faces an existential threat from sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion. A recent study by the Vietnam Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment[35] projected that under a high-emission scenario, up to 40% of the delta could be submerged by the end of the century, displacing millions and jeopardizing the country's food security. The Vietnamese government

[32] Vietnamnet Global, "Approximately 6.8 per cent of Vietnam's GDP lost annually to climate change," August 8, 2023. https://vietnamnet.vn/en/approximately-6-8-per-cent-of-vietnam-s-gdp-lost-annually-to-climate-change-2174551.html

[33] Trungtamwto.vn, "Promoting Vietnam's direct investment in some Mekong sub-region countries," June 6, 2024. https://trungtamwto.vn/chuyen-de/17833-thuc-day-dau-tu-truc-tiep-cua-viet-nam-vao-mot-so-nuoc-tieu-vung-song-mekong

[34] Yadu Pokhrel, Mateo Burbano, Jacob Roush, Hyunwoo Kang, Venkataramana Sridhar, and David W. Hyndman, "A review of the integrated effects of changing climate, land use, and dams on Mekong River hydrology," Water 10(3) (2018): 266. https://doi.org/10.3390/w10030266

[35] VnExpress, "Facing donors, Vietnam urged to rethink coal-fueled growth," October 17, 2016. https://www.english.vov.vn/en/economy/facing-donors-vietnam-urged-to-rethink-coal-fueled-growth-334973.vov

has proactively recognized these threats, integrating climate change adaptation into national development plans and seeking international cooperation to enhance resilience. However, the scale and complexity of this challenge require sustained efforts and substantial investments in infrastructure, technology, and capacity building.

The efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change in the Mekong subregion involve national and regional initiatives. At the national level, Vietnam has developed a comprehensive legal and policy framework to address climate change, including the National Strategy on Climate Change and the National Target Program to Respond to Climate Change. These policies prioritize developing climate-resilient infrastructure, promoting sustainable land and water management practices, and strengthening early warning systems and disaster risk reduction capabilities. Additionally, Vietnam is investing in research and development to identify and scale up innovative solutions, such as using salt-tolerant rice varieties and applying nature-based approaches to coastal protection.

At the regional level, Vietnam has actively participated in various cooperative mechanisms, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), to address the challenges posed by climate change and unsustainable development practices. The MRC, an intergovernmental organization established in 1995, promotes sustainable management and development of the Mekong River Basin. Through programs on climate change adaptation, flood and drought management, and environmental monitoring, the MRC enhances the resilience of riparian communities and ecosystems. Similarly, the LMC, launched in 2016, identified environmental protection and water resource management as key areas of cooperation among its member countries. By fostering dialogue, knowledge sharing, and joint projects, these regional platforms can build trust, mobilize resources, and coordinate actions to address the transboundary impacts of climate change.

The adverse effects of climate change on the Mekong subregion have garnered significant attention in Vietnamese politics as well. This is reflected in strategic national documents and policy frameworks that prioritize climate resilience and sustainable development. High-level political discourse frequently addresses the implications of climate change, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate its impacts. This is evident in the government's integration of climate adaptation measures into national development plans and its active participation in international climate agreements.[36] This underscores the need to recognize climate change as a critical factor influencing national security and socioeconomic stability.

[36] US Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, "International agreement to support Vietnam's ambitious climate and energy goals," December 15, 2022. https://vn.usembassy.gov/international-agreement-to-support-vietnams-ambitious-climate-and-energy-goals/

Furthermore, the Vietnamese media extensively covers this issue. News reports frequently highlight the challenges faced by communities in the Mekong Delta, such as saltwater intrusion, flooding, and declining agricultural productivity. They include personal stories and testimonies from the affected individuals, providing a human perspective on environmental crises. Additionally, media coverage extends to governmental and international efforts to combat climate change, highlighting Vietnam's initiatives and broader regional cooperation required to address these challenges. Public discussions on social media sites and other platforms reflect widespread concern and engagement with the issue, with citizens actively participating in conversations about environmental sustainability and the impact of climate change on their livelihoods.

The perception of and attention toward climate change in the Mekong subregion have evolved over the past decades. Initially, the focus was largely on localized environmental issues and their immediate impacts on agriculture and fisheries. However, as the scientific understanding of climate change has improved and its global implications have become apparent, there has been a shift toward recognizing the broader long-term impacts of climate change. This was particularly evident in the wake of extreme weather events, which highlighted the vulnerability of the Mekong Delta and underscored the need for comprehensive and strategic responses.

Security experts and academicians have highlighted the broader strategic implications of climate change, highlighting its potential to trigger conflicts over resources, induce large-scale migration, and undermine regional stability. They advocated for a comprehensive approach that combines scientific research, technological innovation, and regional cooperation to address the multifaceted nature of the threats. Their analyses stressed the need for robust early warning systems, enhanced disaster-response capabilities, and stronger international partnerships to build resilience against climate-related risks. In contrast, the public views climate change through its immediate and tangible impacts on daily life. Communities in the Mekong Delta, for example, are acutely aware of the effects of rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, and extreme weather events on their livelihood and well-being. These perceptions are shaped by personal experiences and are often voiced through grassroots campaigns and community-based initiatives[37] to promote environmental sustainability and resilience.

The risks posed by climate change, particularly in the Mekong subregion, are expected to remain significant and increase in the near future. Current trends in global climate patterns, coupled with the specific vulnerabilities of the Mekong Delta, suggest an increase in temperature, altered precipitation patterns, and increasing sea levels. These changes will exacerbate the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, posing direct threats to

[37] To Bich Ngoc, "Environmental volunteerism on the rise in Vietnam," PanNature, June 9, 2022. https://www.nature.org.vn/en/2022/06/environmental-volunteerism-on-the-rise-in-vietnam/

agricultural productivity, water resources, and the livelihoods of millions in the region. As a low-lying area, the Mekong Delta is especially susceptible to sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion, which could inundate significant portions of the delta by the end of the century. This would lead to substantial losses of arable land, decreased agricultural yields, and heightened food insecurity, with saltwater intrusion contaminating freshwater supplies that are already stressed by upstream damming and diversion.

Moreover, human activities, such as deforestation, dam construction, and unregulated industrialization, have compounded the climate change impact, reducing the region's natural resilience to environmental stressors. To address these challenges, Vietnam and other countries in the Mekong subregion must enhance their adaptive capacities and resilience. This involves implementing comprehensive climate adaptation strategies, improving the infrastructure to withstand extreme weather, adopting sustainable agricultural practices, and enhancing water management systems. Regional cooperation and international support are essential for addressing transboundary challenges and ensuring the sustainable management of the Mekong River's resources. While the threat of climate change persists, proactive and coordinated efforts can mitigate its impacts and safeguard the livelihoods of the people in the Mekong subregion.

III. Reflection and Prospects of Security Issues in Vietnam

Vietnam's approach to national security has been comprehensively outlined in several key official documents and strategies reflecting its multifaceted concerns and priorities. The 2019 National Defense White Paper served as the cornerstone of Vietnam's defense policy, clearly articulating the nation's strategic context and challenges. This underscores the necessity of a holistic approach to national defense that integrates military, economic, and environmental strategies to safeguard a country's interests. The White Paper emphasizes the importance of modernizing Vietnam's armed forces and enhancing their capabilities to respond to potential threats.

In addition to the National Defense White Paper, Vietnam's security priorities are reflected in the documents from the 13th Party Congress. These documents align the country's defense strategies with its broader socioeconomic development goals, recognizing the interdependence of security and prosperity. As pointed out in the 2021 book, Những điểm mới về an ninh quốc gia trong Văn kiện Đại hội XIII của Đảng (New Points on National Security in the 13th Party Congress' Documents),[38] the most recent documents stress the need to integrate defense and security considerations into all aspects of national planning, from infrastructure development to social policies. This integrated approach will bolster Vietnam's resilience to a spectrum of threats, including cyberattacks, terrorism, and transnational crime. Moreover, these documents highlighted the importance of strengthening regional and international cooperation in security matters, particularly in the context of the ASEAN community.

Vietnam's proactive stance on environmental security is evident in its National Strategy on Climate Change for 2050 and the National Target Program's response to climate change. These policies acknowledge the profound impact of climate change on Vietnam's national security, particularly in vulnerable regions, such as the Mekong Delta. They prioritize building climate resilience and promoting sustainable development practices to mitigate the risks posed by rising sea levels, frequent and intense natural disasters, and other climate-related challenges. Furthermore, they emphasize cross-sectoral and international cooperation to effectively address the complex transboundary nature of climate change.

The Mekong Delta is a focal point of Vietnam's environmental security concerns, given its critical role in the country's food security, economic development, and social stability. The region is highly vulnerable to climate change, including saltwater intrusion, flooding, and coastal erosion.

[38] Edited by the then Minister of Public Security, General Tô Lâm, currently the President of Vietnam.

Vietnam's climate change strategies recognize the urgency of implementing adaptation measures in the Mekong Delta, such as improving the water management infrastructure, promoting climate-smart agricultural practices, and strengthening early warning systems. The documents encourage the engagement of local communities and leveraging traditional knowledge for developing and implementing these measures.

3.1 Vietnam's Approach to the Indo-Pacific Concept

Vietnam's position on the Indo-Pacific concept has been cautious and pragmatic, reflecting its aim to maintain strategic autonomy and balance relationships with the major powers. Although Vietnamese policymakers have refrained from using the term "Indo-Pacific" in official foreign-policy discourse, preferring instead the more established term "Asia-Pacific," the concept has been indirectly referenced in certain policy documents,[39] connecting it to the broader security issues of the country.

Vietnam's approach to the Indo-Pacific concept can be described as open, albeit only under certain conditions. This is evident through its engagement with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which emphasizes ASEAN centrality, inclusivity, and an order based on international law. By supporting the AOIP, Vietnam signals its willingness to engage with the Indo-Pacific concept, provided it aligns with ASEAN's principles and does not undermine the organization's unity and centrality.

The 2019 National Defense White Paper explicitly addressed strategic competition between major powers, and used the term "Indo-Pacific region" within that context. This competition is viewed as a long-term threat that influences Vietnam's economic, technological, and military strategies. The White Paper highlighted the importance of maintaining a stable and secure Indo-Pacific region, advocating the peaceful resolution of disputes and adherence to international law, particularly in the South China Sea.

Vietnam's approach to the Indo-Pacific concept is guided by its foreign policy principles, which include independence, self-reliance, multilateralism, and diversifying external relationships. It seeks to promote a peaceful, stable, and inclusive regional order that upholds international law and respects the sovereignty and legitimate interests of all nations. In line with these principles, Vietnam has emphasized the importance of ASEAN centrality and unity in shaping the regional architecture, strongly supporting ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as platforms for dialogue and cooperation on regional security and economic issues.

[39] Trinh Viet Dung and Dieu Huyen Ho, "Vietnam's Response to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Context of a Rising China."

Vietnam's participation in the AOIP reinforces its connection with the Indo-Pacific framework. Adopted in 2019 as a collective response to the evolving geopolitical landscape, the AOIP promotes an open, inclusive, and rule-based regional architecture that promotes cooperation in areas, such as maritime security, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic integration. Vietnam has actively contributed to developing and implementing the AOIP, demonstrating its strategic alignment with the Indo-Pacific Vision and its commitment to ASEAN's centrality in the regional order. However, while engaging with the Indo-Pacific concept, Vietnam has been cautious about aligning with any specific vision or strategy promoted by the major powers. It sought to maintain a harmonious approach toward its relationships with the US, China, Japan, India, and other key players in the region, avoiding actions that could be perceived as taking sides. This balanced approach is evident in its official discourse, which emphasizes the importance of upholding international law, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations.

3.2 Actors Involved in Strategy Development and Implementation

In Vietnam, developing and implementing national security strategies involves a complex network of actors, with the Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs forming the "three pillars" (ba chân kiềng) of national security. These ministries collaborate with each other and other governmental bodies to address the country's multifaceted security challenges.

This close coordination underscores the country's recognition of the interconnected nature of traditional and non-traditional security challenges and the need for a holistic approach to addressing them. By leveraging the expertise and resources of these ministries and other relevant governmental bodies, Vietnam aims to develop and implement effective strategies to safeguard its national interests and maintain a stable and secure environment. At the regional level, Vietnam actively engages with ASEAN to shape its regional security architecture and promote a rule-based, inclusive Indo-Pacific order. ASEAN is a key platform for Vietnam to advance its security interests and collaborate with other member states regarding common challenges. Through mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, which include eight dialogue partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the US), Vietnam participates in discussions on regional security issues, such as maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. These forums provide an opportunity for Vietnam to share its perspective, build trust, and enhance practical cooperation with its regional partners.

However, ASEAN member states' involvement in regional security discussions is not always uniform because each country has its unique set of interests and strategic calculations. Some ASEAN member states, particularly those with closer economic and political ties to China, may be more cautious in their approach to certain security issues, such as the South China Sea dispute, to avoid jeopardizing their relationship with Beijing. This dynamic can lead to a lack of consensus within ASEAN and limit the organization's ability to take decisive action on sensitive security matters. To overcome these challenges, Vietnam has sought to diversify its partnerships and engage with other regional and global powers through bilateral and multilateral frameworks, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, to balance its relationships and hedge against potential risks.

3.3 Ongoing Efforts and Further Opportunities for Collaboration

From Vietnam's perspective, several collaborative measures are being pursued in the Indo-Pacific region to address the aforementioned security issues, such as strategic competition among major powers, territorial disputes, and non-traditional security threats. These measures included joint military training and exercises, dialogue platforms, agreements, and diplomatic efforts. A key collaboration area is Vietnam's participation in regional security forums and mechanisms, particularly those led by the ASEAN. The ADMM and ADMM-Plus are important platforms for dialogue and cooperation on regional security issues. Through these forums, Vietnam engages in discussions and practical cooperation with other ASEAN member states and external partners on topics, such as maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping. For example, Vietnam participated in the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise to enhance interoperability and capacity building among regional navies to address common maritime security challenges.

Furthermore, Vietnam actively participates in other ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS and the ARF, which provide dialogue and confidence-building opportunities among Indo-Pacific countries. These forums allow Vietnam to express its concerns, share its perspectives, and build a consensus on regional security issues and the need for a rule-based and inclusive regional order. Vietnam has strengthened its defense and security cooperation with various Indo-Pacific countries through joint military training, exercises, and agreements. For instance, Vietnam and the US have conducted regular naval engagements, such as port visits and joint exercises,[40] to enhance maritime domain awareness and interoperability. In 2019, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on

[40] See, for example, US Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, "USS Blue Ridge and USCGC Waesche arrive in Cam Ranh, Vietnam," July 10, 2023. https://vn.usembassy.gov/uss-blue-ridge-and-uscgc-waesche-arrive-in-cam-ranh-vietnam/

Promoting Defense Cooperation to deepen collaboration in areas, such as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping operations, and maritime security. Similarly, Vietnam has expanded its defense ties with other regional powers, such as Japan, Australia, and India, through bilateral dialogues, training programs, and capacity-building initiatives.[41],[42],[43]

To further enhance collaboration on security issues in the Indo-Pacific region, Vietnam should explore various forms of cooperation with regional and extra-regional partners. These collaborative efforts could focus on addressing common security challenges, promoting confidence-building measures, and enhancing capacity-building in areas, such as maritime security, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations.

A potential avenue for cooperation is minilateral engagements with like-minded partners within ASEAN. By working closely with selected ASEAN member states that share similar concerns and interests, Vietnam can initiate focused dialogues and joint initiatives to address specific security issues. Such minilateral cooperation would complement existing ASEAN-led mechanisms and provide a targeted platform for addressing sensitive security matters while maintaining ASEAN centrality and unity. Another opportunity for collaboration is engaging with multilateral frameworks that align with Vietnam's strategic interests and priorities. For example, Vietnam could actively participate in the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), a multilateral framework proposed by India that focuses on seven pillars of cooperation – maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology, and academic cooperation; trade, connectivity, and maritime transport. By contributing to the IPOI and shaping its agenda, Vietnam could benefit from enhanced cooperation and capacity building in areas critical to its security and development, while promoting an inclusive and balanced approach to regional cooperation.

Furthermore, Vietnam could strengthen its cooperation with the European Union (EU) and its member states as they have shown increasing interest and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Deepening dialogue and collaboration with the EU on issues of maritime security, climate change, and sustainable development could provide Vietnam with valuable opportunities to diversify its partnerships, access partners' expertise and resources, and address regional security challenges from a broader perspective.

In pursuing these collaborative measures, Vietnam should remain committed to the principles of independence, self-reliance, and diversification of external relationships. By engaging with a wide range of partners in a balanced and pragmatic manner, both within and beyond the

[41] Sebastian Strangio, "Vietnam, Japan establish comprehensive strategic partnership," The Diplomat, November 1, 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/vietnam-japan-establish-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/

[42] Ministry of National Defence, "Vietnam to enhance defense ties with Australia," July 11, 2023. https://mod.gov.vn/en/event/detail?current=true&urile=wcm:path:/mod/sa-mod-en/sa-en-news/sa-en-news-rela/6ab80611-0297-4bf7-94a1-47f61fb1b8ff

[43] Mandeep Singh, "India, Vietnam deepen defense partnership to confront regional challenges," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, April 6, 2024. https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/04/india-vietnam-deepen-defense-partnership-to-confront-regional-challenges/

Indo-Pacific region, Vietnam can effectively navigate the complex security landscape and contribute to a stable, inclusive, and rule-based regional order without being perceived as aligned with any particular power bloc.

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