

The Indo-Pacific Focus of U.S. Strategy: Implications and Emerging Credibility Challenges

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The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the central arena of contemporary geopolitical competition, positioning the United States as a key actor in shaping regional order amid shifting power balances and expanding security challenges. This study argues that U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy cannot be understood through declaratory policy or military posture alone. Instead, its effectiveness is shaped by the interaction of historical legacies, theoretical logics, material capabilities, normative consistency, and regional perceptions. Drawing on realism, liberal institutionalism, and strategic competition theory, the analysis demonstrates that U.S. credibility is relational and context-dependent rather than solely intent-driven. While credibility remains comparatively strong among formal allies, it is more conditional among middle and smaller powers that prioritise autonomy and economic stability. The prevalence of hedging reflects rational adaptation to uncertainty generated by capability constraints, domestic political volatility, and normative inconsistencies, particularly the tension between maritime law advocacy and non-ratification of UNCLOS. The study concludes that sustained U.S. influence depends on consistent engagement aligned with regional priorities.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific Strategy, U.S. Credibility, Regional Perceptions, Non-Traditional Security, Strategic Competition, ASEAN Centrality

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region which encompasses the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean has become a new economic and geopolitical theatre. The region is characterized by home to half of the world's population, a staggering two-thirds (60 percent) of global GDP and seven of the world's largest militaries. The region also constitutes 65 percent of the world's oceans and 25 percent of the land. This area has long been the crossroads of trade and culture, though its importance in the 21st century has only grown amid a rising China and

increasingly complicated regional conflicts. The strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific is underscored by its role as a critical route for global trade and energy supply, making it a central theatre for geopolitical competition among major powers, notably the United States and China.

These developments prompted Washington to reorient its foreign policy, beginning with the Obama administration's "Asia Pivot" and advancing through Trump and Biden. The 2017 Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy (*Advancing a Shared Vision*, n.d.) and the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy reflect U.S. efforts to uphold a rules-based order and counter growing Chinese assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea (*Indo-Pacific Strategy Of The United States*, 2022a).

U.S. perceptions of the Indo-Pacific are shaped by multiple, overlapping strategic concerns, with China's rise occupying a central position in Washington's regional calculus. Viewed increasingly as a systemic challenger to the existing international order, China's growing economic and military capabilities have prompted the United States to deepen multilateral security cooperation and reinforce normative commitments. Initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), involving Japan, India, and Australia, reflect an effort to strengthen deterrence while simultaneously promoting shared democratic principles (Abraham, 2020). In parallel, the United States has sought to intensify engagement with Southeast Asian states, recognising the region's strategic importance in constraining coercive behaviour and sustaining a cooperative security environment (Khalid & Mat, 2024).

Despite this sustained strategic focus, the effectiveness of U.S. engagement remains a subject of debate. Existing scholarship has tended to examine military balancing and economic initiatives in relative isolation, offering limited insight into how material capability constraints, domestic political volatility, and alliance signalling interact to shape regional perceptions. This analytical gap obscures the ways in which Indo-Pacific states assess the credibility and durability of U.S. commitments beyond declaratory strategy alone. This paper argues that the central constraint on U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is a widening credibility gap defined as a divergence between U.S. strategic intent and regional perceptions of long-term commitment driven by domestic political volatility, inconsistent economic statecraft, and fragmented alliance coordination. Particular attention is given to the underexplored implications of a potential "Trump 2.0" administration for long-term regional stability.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design to analyse the evolution and implications of U.S. Indo-Pacific policy. Drawing on scholarly literature, policy documents, and official U.S. strategic statements, it examines the drivers, components, and geopolitical significance of Washington's regional approach. Rather than treating U.S. strategy as self-explanatory, the analysis foregrounds how Indo-Pacific states interpret, conditionally endorse, hedge against, or remain neutral toward American

commitments, thereby conceptualising credibility as a relational and perception-driven outcome.

Theoretical Perspectives on U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

This study adopts a plural theoretical framework that draws on realism, liberal institutionalism, and strategic competition theory. The choice to employ multiple lenses is intentional and reflects the layered nature of U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific, where military power, institutional norms, economic interdependence, and technological rivalry intersect rather than operate in isolation. Instead of privileging a single explanatory model, the analysis uses each perspective to illuminate distinct dimensions of U.S. strategy and to clarify how different logics shape policy outcomes across the region.

From a realist standpoint, U.S. Indo-Pacific policy is driven primarily by concerns over power distribution, deterrence, and balance-of-power dynamics within an anarchic international system. Realism frames the Indo-Pacific as a strategic theatre in which China's rapid military modernisation, expanding naval reach, and increasingly coercive behaviour challenge the prevailing regional equilibrium. Within this logic, U.S. initiatives such as reinforcing alliance commitments with Japan and Australia, expanding defence cooperation with India, adjusting forward force posture, and conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) are best understood as balancing strategies aimed at preserving favourable power asymmetries (*John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist between Geopolitics and Power | Journal of International Relations and Development*, n.d.). In this study, realist assumptions are operationalised through analysis of alliance modernisation, deterrence signalling, force-posture adjustments, and defence-industrial constraints, particularly in sections examining capability limitations and credibility dilemmas.

At the same time, realism alone offers an incomplete account of U.S. Indo-Pacific engagement. Liberal institutionalism provides a necessary complementary perspective by emphasising the stabilising role of international institutions, shared rules, and economic interdependence. From this viewpoint, U.S. support for ASEAN-led mechanisms, its articulation of a rules-based order under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework, and participation in initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) represent efforts to manage regional uncertainty through institutional embeddedness rather than coercion alone (Keohane & Nye, 1987). Liberal institutionalism is applied in this study through examination of U.S. engagement with multilateral forums, its endorsement of ASEAN centrality, and its advocacy of international maritime law, including the credibility tensions generated by Washington's continued non-ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

To capture the evolving character of U.S.-China rivalry, the analysis also draws on strategic competition theory, which conceptualises great-power rivalry as a multidimensional contest extending beyond conventional military

competition into economic, technological, and normative domains. This framework highlights how states seek long-term structural advantage by shaping supply chains, technological standards, and institutional norms (Friedberg, 2018). Viewed through this lens, U.S. policies such as export controls on advanced technologies, supply-chain “friend-shoring,” digital governance initiatives, and infrastructure alternatives to China’s Belt and Road Initiative function as instruments of competitive statecraft rather than as isolated policy measures. Strategic competition theory is operationalised in sections that analyse economic decoupling, technological leadership, and China’s integrated counter-strategy. These perspectives provide a structured yet flexible analytical foundation for the study. Realism explains the security-driven core of U.S. strategy, liberal institutionalism captures its normative and multilateral dimensions, and strategic competition theory accounts for the expanding scope of rivalry into economic and technological arenas. Subsequent sections apply these frameworks to examine the drivers of the Indo-Pacific shift, the emergence of capability-credibility gaps, regional perceptions of U.S. commitments, and the broader implications for regional order. This integrated approach enables a more critical and nuanced assessment of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy than reliance on any single theoretical lens.

Historical Context of U.S. Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific has unfolded through several distinct historical phases, each shaped by changing systemic pressures, domestic political priorities, and shifting regional power dynamics. Although the form and intensity of U.S. involvement have varied over time, one consistent pattern stands out: security commitments have tended to outpace economic and institutional engagement. This imbalance has left a durable imprint on regional perceptions and remains central to contemporary debates about the credibility and sustainability of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

During the Cold War, U.S. involvement in the region then commonly described as the “Asia-Pacific” was overwhelmingly security-oriented and rooted in the logic of containment. The region functioned as a frontline in the ideological and strategic contest with the Soviet Union and communist movements across East Asia. In response, Washington constructed a hub-and-spokes alliance system anchored in bilateral security treaties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand. These arrangements reflected realist priorities focused on deterrence and balance-of-power management rather than the promotion of multilateral regional autonomy (Cha, 2016). While these security commitments were deep and enduring, economic engagement during this period remained selective and instrumental. U.S. economic initiatives were largely designed to reinforce strategic allies rather than to foster inclusive regional institutions. As a result, economic cooperation mechanisms remained underdeveloped, reinforcing the perception of the United States as a predominantly military actor. This early asymmetry between security provision

and economic leadership established a precedent that continues to shape how regional states interpret U.S. priorities.

The post–Cold War period brought important changes in both the strategic environment and the character of U.S. engagement. With the disappearance of a single overriding security threat, Washington placed greater emphasis on economic integration, market liberalisation, and institutional cooperation. U.S. participation in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and its leadership in negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) reflected a liberal institutionalist effort to embed American influence through rules, norms, and economic interdependence rather than through military dominance alone (Ikenberry, 2020). Yet this phase of engagement was marked by growing inconsistency between rhetoric and policy continuity. Despite repeated affirmations of long-term commitment to regional economic integration, domestic political resistance to trade liberalisation constrained U.S. follow-through. The withdrawal from the TPP in 2017 proved particularly consequential. For many Indo-Pacific states, it reinforced the perception that U.S. economic leadership was vulnerable to domestic political shifts, casting doubt on the reliability of commitments that require sustained internal consensus.

China's rise as a major economic and military power further exposed these historical inconsistencies. As Beijing expanded its regional presence through trade, infrastructure financing, and maritime activity, the United States recalibrated its approach through initiatives such as the "Pivot to Asia" and, later, the Indo-Pacific framework. However, this renewed engagement unfolded against the backdrop of earlier disengagements, amplifying regional concerns about credibility. As a result, many regional actors assess U.S. strategy less through individual policy announcements than through accumulated historical experience. These patterns have direct implications for contemporary credibility dilemmas. Indo-Pacific states tend to evaluate U.S. commitments not only on the basis of declared objectives or military deployments, but also through long-term behavioural consistency. Recurrent shifts between engagement and retrenchment particularly in the economic domain have encouraged hedging strategies and diversified partnerships. From a realist perspective, such behaviour represents rational adaptation to uncertainty, while from a liberal institutionalist viewpoint it reflects weakened institutional trust. Recognising this historical trajectory is therefore essential for assessing both the constraints on U.S. leadership and the conditions under which sustained influence in the Indo-Pacific remains possible.

Drivers of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Shift

The U.S. strategic reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific is often portrayed as a linear response to China's rise. While China's expanding power constitutes an important backdrop to U.S. strategic recalibration, explanations that treat the Indo-Pacific shift as a simple reaction to Beijing's rise remain analytically insufficient. Such deterministic accounts obscure the broader combination of historical legacies, structural transformations, and regional dynamics that shape

Washington's approach. A more balanced interpretation suggests that the Indo-Pacific framework has emerged from the interaction of evolving security concerns, changes in global economic organisation, and the agency of regional actors, rather than from a singular focus on China alone.

1. *Cold War Foundations and Institutional Path Dependence*

During the Cold War, U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific was primarily shaped by containment imperatives and alliance management. The region's strategic significance stemmed from the need to prevent the spread of communism and to secure maritime routes vital to global commerce. In response, Washington constructed a hub-and-spokes alliance system through bilateral security treaties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand. These arrangements reflected a realist logic of deterrence and control, privileging bilateral dependence on U.S. security guarantees over the development of autonomous multilateral regional institutions (Gaddis, 2005). The durability of this alliance architecture has had long-term consequences. Even after the Cold War, institutional path dependence continued to shape U.S. strategic behaviour, helping to explain why contemporary Indo-Pacific policy remains heavily security-centric despite repeated rhetorical commitments to more comprehensive regional engagement.

2. *Post-Cold War Economic Globalisation and Strategic Limits*

In the post-Cold War period, U.S. policy drivers increasingly shifted toward economic globalisation and institutional integration. The expansion of transnational supply chains, deepening economic interdependence with East Asian economies, and the consolidation of regional production networks transformed the Indo-Pacific into a central engine of global growth. U.S. participation in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and leadership in negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) reflected a liberal institutionalist effort to embed American influence through rule-setting and economic governance rather than military dominance alone (Ikenberry, 2020). Yet this economic turn proved politically fragile. Domestic resistance to trade liberalisation constrained policy continuity and ultimately culminated in the U.S. withdrawal from the TPP. For many Indo-Pacific states, this episode weakened confidence in U.S. economic leadership and reinforced perceptions that American commitments were vulnerable to internal political change, particularly as China's regional economic centrality continued to expand.

3. *China's Rise as a Catalyst, Not a Singular Driver*

China's military modernisation, assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, and expansive economic initiatives have undoubtedly accelerated U.S. strategic recalibration. Nevertheless, treating China as the sole driver risks overstating U.S. agency while underestimating deeper structural and regional dynamics. From a strategic competition perspective, Washington's response reflects concerns about long-term structural disadvantage rather than an immediate focus on military confrontation alone (Friedberg, 2018)). As a result,

economic statecraft, technological controls, and supply-chain diversification have become as central to the Indo-Pacific shift as traditional deterrence measures. At the same time, alternative interpretations suggest that U.S. strategy is also shaped by declining relative economic influence. Viewed in this light, the Indo-Pacific framework can be understood partly as an effort to reassert leadership in a region where U.S. primacy is no longer assumed, rather than as a purely reactive strategy directed at China.

4. *Regional Agency and ASEAN-Centred Perspectives*

A key limitation in many strategic analyses is the marginalisation of regional agency. Southeast Asian states are not passive recipients of U.S. or Chinese strategies; instead, they actively shape regional order through hedging, institutional entrepreneurship, and norm promotion. ASEAN's emphasis on inclusivity, non-alignment, and centrality reflects a deliberate effort to resist domination by any single power and to preserve strategic autonomy (Acharya, 2014). From this perspective, the U.S. Indo-Pacific shift is partly driven by the need to remain relevant within ASEAN-led institutional frameworks. Washington's endorsement of ASEAN centrality signals recognition that unilateral or purely alliance-based approaches are insufficient. However, regional scepticism persists when U.S. policies appear to prioritise strategic competition over stability and inclusivity, reinforcing concerns about alignment pressures.

5. *Security Concerns Shaping U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*

Security challenges in the Indo-Pacific extend well beyond conventional military threats and cannot be understood solely through the lens of great-power rivalry. Although tensions involving China, North Korea, and Taiwan remain salient, regional stability is increasingly shaped by non-traditional security challenges that directly affect political resilience, economic stability, and societal well-being. For many Indo-Pacific states, these concerns are more immediate than the prospect of high-intensity conflict and play a significant role in shaping alignment preferences.

Maritime insecurity represents one such challenge, particularly for coastal and archipelagic states whose economies depend heavily on maritime resources. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, piracy, and contested maritime jurisdictions undermine livelihoods and strain regional relations, especially in Southeast Asia. U.S. initiatives focused on maritime domain awareness, coast-guard cooperation, and capacity-building seek to address these challenges without overt militarisation (Kliman et al., 2021). From a liberal institutionalist perspective, such efforts aim to reinforce rule-based maritime governance, though their credibility is constrained by normative inconsistencies most notably Washington's continued non-ratification of the UNCLOS.

Climate change has emerged as an equally critical security concern, particularly for Pacific Island countries and low-lying regions of Southeast Asia. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation pose direct threats to human security and state capacity. While U.S. engagement in

disaster relief, climate finance, and resilience-building reflects growing recognition of climate change as a security multiplier, regional perceptions remain mixed due to concerns about consistency and institutionalisation, creating opportunities for China to expand influence through climate-related assistance (Smith, 2022).

Rapid digitalisation has further expanded the regional security agenda. Cyber espionage, disinformation campaigns, and vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure affect governance capacity and public trust, especially in smaller states with limited technical resources (Brenner, 2021; Kliman et al., 2021). Although U.S. initiatives promoting cybersecurity cooperation and digital standards acknowledge the technological dimensions of contemporary security competition (Farrell & Newman, 2019), many regional actors remain cautious, seeking technical support while avoiding alignment that could intensify strategic polarisation (Acharya, 2014).

Public-health security and supply-chain resilience gained renewed prominence following the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed vulnerabilities in global production networks and reinforced concerns about overdependence on external suppliers (Farrell & Newman, 2020). In response, the United States has emphasised vaccine diplomacy, supply-chain diversification, and economic resilience as components of its Indo-Pacific strategy (White House, 2022). Nevertheless, regional reception has been uneven, with U.S. engagement often perceived as reactive rather than institutionalised, particularly when compared with China's sustained presence in regional health and logistics networks (Caballero-Anthony, 2018).

Taken together, the growing prominence of non-military security challenges highlights a central tension in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Although Washington increasingly acknowledges comprehensive security threats, resource allocation and strategic messaging remain disproportionately oriented toward military deterrence. This misalignment encourages hedging behaviour and weakens institutional trust. Ultimately, the effectiveness of U.S. Indo-Pacific policy depends not only on deterrence capabilities but also on its ability to address the everyday security concerns that shape regional perceptions of legitimacy, leadership, and credibility.

The Capability-Credibility Gap: Resources, Commitments, and Regional Perceptions

A recurring concern in assessments of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is the emergence of a widening capability-credibility gap. This gap refers to the growing distance between Washington's declared strategic commitments and its material, political, and institutional capacity to sustain them over time. Although U.S. policy documents consistently emphasise deterrence, alliance reassurance, and long-term regional engagement, the credibility of these commitments is increasingly subject to scrutiny by regional actors. Importantly, credibility erosion is neither uniform nor inevitable; it varies across countries and issue areas

and must be understood through the perceptions and responses of those expected to rely on U.S. commitments.

From a realist perspective, credibility is closely tied to material capability and a demonstrated willingness to incur costs. In this regard, persistent constraints within the U.S. defence-industrial base have raised questions about Washington's ability to sustain prolonged or simultaneous high-intensity contingencies in the Indo-Pacific. Delays in arms deliveries, shortages of critical munitions, and competing global demands particularly those generated by conflicts in Europe and the Middle East have amplified doubts about whether U.S. resources are sufficient to meet expanding strategic obligations (Charap & Priebe, 2023). These constraints are closely monitored by regional actors, for whom credibility is judged less by declaratory intent than by observable performance.

Regional perceptions of U.S. credibility are, however, far from uniform. Formal allies such as Japan and Australia continue to express relatively high confidence in U.S. security guarantees, reinforced by alliance modernisation, expanded joint exercises, and institutionalised defence planning. For these states, credibility is embedded in dense alliance structures and shared threat assessments, particularly with respect to China's military trajectory (Tow, 2022). By contrast, middle and smaller powers including Indonesia, Malaysia, and several Pacific Island states tend to adopt more cautious assessments. These countries place greater emphasis on consistency, economic engagement, and respect for regional autonomy, areas in which U.S. performance has been uneven and, at times, unpredictable.

Perception-based analyses suggest that credibility concerns are most pronounced in the economic and political domains rather than in immediate military deterrence. The U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, uncertainty surrounding the durability of initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and the possibility of renewed policy reversals under a future "Trump 2.0" administration have reinforced the view that U.S. engagement remains vulnerable to domestic political change (Kuik, 2021). As a result, many Indo-Pacific states interpret U.S. strategy as rhetorically robust on security while comparatively weak in delivering sustained economic commitment.

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, credibility is also shaped by institutional reliability and normative consistency. In this context, the disjuncture between U.S. advocacy of a rules-based order and its selective institutional participation most notably its continued non-ratification of the UNCLOS undermines confidence among states that rely heavily on legal frameworks for protection. Such inconsistencies contribute to scepticism within ASEAN, where institutional continuity and neutrality are valued as safeguards against great-power volatility (Acharya, 2014).

At the same time, it would be analytically misleading to characterise regional responses as a wholesale erosion of confidence in U.S. leadership. The

prevailing pattern is instead one of strategic hedging. Many states seek to retain access to U.S. security benefits while preserving economic and diplomatic flexibility vis-à-vis China. From a strategic competition perspective, this behaviour complicates Washington's efforts to mobilise collective action, even as the United States continues to occupy a central position in the region's security architecture.

Ultimately, the capability-credibility gap is best understood as contextual and relational rather than absolute. U.S. credibility remains comparatively strong in alliance-based military deterrence but weaker in economic leadership, institutional consistency, and long-term political reliability. These differentiated perceptions help explain why the Indo-Pacific has not consolidated into rigid geopolitical blocs despite intensifying U.S.-China competition. Narrowing this gap therefore requires more than enhanced defence capacity and clearer strategic signalling; it also depends on sustained economic engagement, deeper institutional commitment, and greater insulation of regional policy from domestic political volatility.

Key elements of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

The United States articulates its Indo-Pacific Strategy through several interconnected pillars designed to address regional challenges, strengthen partnerships, and promote long-term security and prosperity. These pillars reflect the strategic objectives and normative principles that underpin U.S. engagement across the region.

1. FOIP and UNCLOS: Limits of Normative Leadership

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework is grounded in principles of sovereignty, adherence to international law, and open economic exchange. It seeks to deter coercive behaviour particularly that associated with China while reinforcing a rules-based order regarded as essential to regional stability. Central to FOIP is the reaffirmation of long-standing principles of territorial integrity that have been challenged by China's assertive actions in the South China Sea (Toropchin, 2022). By emphasising adherence to international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), FOIP promotes the resolution of maritime disputes through legal and institutional processes rather than coercive measures (Dachi et al., 2023). In this context, the protection of freedom of navigation and overflight in critical sea lanes that sustain global commerce is presented as a cornerstone of an open and stable maritime environment across the Indo-Pacific (Scott, 2019).

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, however, the credibility of rule-based leadership depends not only on normative advocacy but also on legal embeddedness and consistent institutional participation. UNCLOS constitutes the foundational framework governing maritime rights, dispute settlement, and the protection of smaller coastal and archipelagic states. Although the United States frequently invokes UNCLOS provisions to challenge excessive maritime claims particularly in the South China Sea its continued non-ratification weakens

its ability to act as a fully credible norm entrepreneur. For many Indo-Pacific states, especially within ASEAN, legal consistency is not an abstract principle but a practical requirement for safeguarding sovereignty in an asymmetric strategic environment (Beckman, 2013).

This tension is particularly evident in Southeast Asia, where international law is widely viewed as a key equaliser vis-à-vis more powerful actor. Regional governments often differentiate between rhetorical support for rules and demonstrable commitment to them, and U.S. non-ratification of UNCLOS complicates this distinction. While Washington largely adheres to UNCLOS provisions as customary international law, regional perceptions are shaped less by technical legal arguments than by visible institutional commitments. As a result, U.S. advocacy of maritime order is at times perceived as selectively instrumental rather than normatively binding.

The credibility challenge is further sharpened when FOIP is considered alongside China's own approach to maritime law. Although Beijing is frequently criticised for selective interpretation of UNCLOS most notably its rejection of the 2016 arbitral ruling its status as a formal signatory allows China to contest U.S. critiques on procedural grounds. This dynamic complicates Washington's efforts to mobilise regional support around legal norms and weakens collective pressure in defence of the maritime order (Hayton, 2020). Consequently, many Indo-Pacific states express rhetorical support for FOIP principles while simultaneously reaffirming ASEAN-led norms of inclusivity and neutrality. Such positioning reflects scepticism about the durability of U.S. normative commitments rather than an outright rejection of U.S. leadership.

2. Strengthening and Modernizing Alliances and Partnerships

Diplomatically, the United States has moved to reinvigorate its network of alliances and partnerships as a central pillar of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Initiatives such as the Quad, AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States of America), and the Partners in the Blue Pacific have come to form the backbone of an evolving regional security architecture. Collectively, these arrangements are intended to address shared security concerns, reinforce regional stability, and counterbalance China's expanding strategic influence.

The revitalised Quad, in particular, has expanded cooperation beyond traditional security coordination to include maritime domain awareness, infrastructure development, and public health. This broader agenda reflects an effort to respond to regional challenges in a more comprehensive manner, while remaining attentive to concerns arising from China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the South China Sea (Gabriel et al., 2020). Given the Indo-Pacific's role as home to some of the world's most critical sea lanes, the Quad's emphasis on maritime security also aligns closely with wider economic and strategic imperatives linked to trade, energy flows, and freedom of navigation (Lindley, 2020).

AUKUS represents a more explicitly defence-oriented form of collaboration. Centred on advanced technology sharing and the provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, the arrangement marks a significant deepening of defence integration among its members (Mickiewicz, 2023). AUKUS is widely interpreted as a response to China's rapid military modernisation, enhancing Australia's capacity to contribute to regional deterrence and to the maintenance of the broader Indo-Pacific balance of power (Rana & Kumar, 2023). At the same time, its narrow membership and technological focus have generated debate within the region about escalation risks and the inclusivity of emerging security architectures.

The United States has also deepened engagement with Southeast Asia, upgrading the U.S.-ASEAN relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022 (*The United States-ASEAN Relationship - United States Department of State*, n.d.-a). Washington has reported the implementation of 99 per cent of the objectives outlined in the 2022-2025 ASEAN-U.S. Plan of Action, signalling an effort to translate strategic commitments into measurable outcomes (*The United States' Enduring Commitment to the Indo-Pacific Region | The White House*, n.d.). In parallel, the launch of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative and the prioritisation of renewing the Compacts of Free Association (COFAs) reflect a renewed focus on Pacific Island states, where strategic competition increasingly intersects with development and climate-related concerns (*Elements of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy | The Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs*, n.d.). These initiatives are intended to deepen cooperation in areas that resonate strongly with regional priorities, including climate finance, maritime security, and digital connectivity (*REPORTS: Joint Statement of the US-Pacific Forum Leaders, September 25th 2023 | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat*, n.d.). For many Pacific Island and Southeast Asian states, such issue areas are more immediately salient than traditional military deterrence, shaping perceptions of external partners' relevance and reliability.

At the same time, while these efforts align closely with stated U.S. strategic objectives, their longer-term impact remains contingent on sustained political commitment. This conditionality lies at the centre of ongoing debates about U.S. credibility in the Indo-Pacific. Collectively, these partnerships operationalise realist balancing by pooling military capabilities while also advancing liberal institutionalist objectives through shared norms, interoperability, and institutionalised dialogue. Their effectiveness, however, ultimately depends on consistent U.S. engagement, as even limited perceptions of disengagement risk weakening deterrence and reinforcing regional hedging behaviour.

3. *Economic Initiatives*

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) represents a major U.S. diplomatic initiative aimed at sustaining economic engagement and

offering a multi-national framework as an alternative to China's economic influence in the region (*FACT SHEET: Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* | *The White House*, n.d.). Structured around four pillars are trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy, IPEF reflects a multifaceted approach to regional economic cooperation.

IPEF marks a significant departure from conventional free trade agreements. By late 2024, agreements on supply chains, the clean economy, and the fair economy had entered into force (*2025 Trade Policy Agenda WTO at 30 and 2024 Annual Report 02282025-FINAL*, n.d.). This framework is complemented by a "friend-shoring" agenda intended to strengthen supply-chain resilience among trusted partners (*Assessing IPEF's New Supply Chains Agreement*, n.d.). Investment has also emerged as a key instrument. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has committed substantial capital to the region, including investments of \$737 million in Vietnam and \$526 million in Indonesia, supporting sectors such as clean energy and infrastructure (*The United States-ASEAN Relationship - United States Department of State*, n.d.-b).

Despite these initiatives, the absence of market-access provisions and concerns over policy continuity have generated doubts about the durability of U.S. economic engagement. As a result, regional states increasingly question whether Washington can sustain meaningful long-term economic alternatives to China. Strategically, IPEF reflects the logic of competitive economic statecraft, seeking to reshape supply chains and regulatory standards in ways that limit China's structural leverage. However, without binding trade commitments, its capacity to alter existing patterns of economic interdependence remains constrained, reducing its effectiveness as a tool of strategic competition.

4. *Military Posture to Bolster Security*

The United States is adjusting its military posture in the Indo-Pacific to become more distributed, resilient, and closely integrated with allied forces in response to China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities (*China's Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy - The Defence Horizon Journal*, n.d.). This adjustment involves not only an expanded physical presence across the region but also the refinement of operational concepts designed to sustain access, mobility, and deterrence under increasingly contested conditions.

Enhanced cooperation with regional partners forms a central component of this evolving posture. Trilateral exercises involving the United States, Australia, and Japan have been expanded to improve interoperability and to signal coordinated responses to shared security challenges (Nathan, 2021). Beyond their immediate tactical value, such exercises carry important signalling effects, reinforcing U.S. commitment to regional security and reassuring allies amid heightened tensions, particularly in the South China Sea (Colley & Suhas, 2021).

At the same time, Washington has pursued a series of defence agreements that deepen its operational presence across key theatres. The Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines enables a greater rotational U.S. military presence and expanded access to strategic facilities, strengthening Manila's capacity to deter coercion (Yusup Imannuridin et al., 2024; Ashta & Stokes, 2022). Similarly, the United States has reinforced bilateral defence ties with Japan through updated security arrangements, reaffirmed mutual defence commitments, and expanded military cooperation (Trunov, 2023). The evolution of the Malabar Exercise from a bilateral U.S.-India drill into a quadrilateral initiative involving Japan and Australia illustrates the broader trend toward multilateral military coordination. In parallel, infrastructure upgrades across Guam, the Philippines, and Japan have enhanced U.S. operational sustainability, with Guam emerging as a critical hub for air and naval activities in the Western Pacific (Nikitin, 2022).

The United States has also sought to advance high-end warfighting capabilities with key allies, modernise alliance structures, and deepen its Major Defence Partnership with India. These initiatives are framed as contributing to regional stability, including peace and security in the Taiwan Strait, while remaining consistent with the One China policy and long-standing legislative commitments (Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, 2022).

Beyond conventional deterrence, U.S. policy increasingly emphasises civilian and non-traditional security. Expanded Coast Guard engagement, partner-capacity building, and enhanced counterterrorism cooperation reflect an effort to address a wider spectrum of regional challenges. Measures to strengthen cyber resilience, improve foreign-fighter detection, and enhance preparedness for natural disasters, biological threats, and transnational crime form part of a broader conception of comprehensive regional security (Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, 2022).

Despite the breadth of these initiatives, persistent resource constraints, delays in capability delivery, and uncertainties regarding U.S. endurance during prolonged or simultaneous crises continue to shape regional assessments. For many Indo-Pacific states, these limitations complicate confidence in Washington's ability to sustain its military commitments over the long term, reinforcing broader concerns about credibility even as U.S. security engagement deepens. Collectively, U.S. military posture in the Indo-Pacific reflects the interaction of realism, liberal institutionalism, and strategic competition theory. Alliance modernisation, force-posture adjustments, and deterrence initiatives align with realist imperatives, while engagement through multilateral frameworks reflects liberal institutionalist assumptions. At the same time, the integration of military, technological, and economic tools underscores the logic of strategic competition shaping U.S. efforts to counter China's multidimensional rise.

Indo-Pacific Policy Under “Trump 2.0”

A prospective “Trump 2.0” administration is widely expected to reshape U.S. Indo-Pacific policy by shifting from an emphasis on collective action toward a more unilateral and assertive approach. This orientation would be driven by an intensified “America First” doctrine that prioritises direct, transactional benefits for the United States over the maintenance of the existing international order (Trump Wins-Can the Indo-Pacific Region Withstand? Stimson Center, n.d.). The strategy is structured around three core elements: aggressive economic statecraft aimed at constraining China, a transactional re-evaluation of alliances, and a contraction of broader global commitments to concentrate resources on the Indo-Pacific (*Trump 2.0 Would Get Mixed Responses in the Indo-Pacific* | RAND, n.d.). While the objective of countering China’s regional influence reflects continuity with earlier administrations, the anticipated methods are likely to be more extreme and unpredictable, creating a paradox in which a tougher U.S. posture may erode the allied trust required to sustain it.

1. Trade Escalation and Its Disruptive Effects on Supply Chain Networks

A “Trump 2.0” administration is expected to pursue an unprecedentedly aggressive tariff strategy, extending well beyond measures adopted during the first term (*Ask the Experts: What Does Trump 2.0 Mean for China?* - *China Dialogues*, n.d.). Proposals include blanket tariffs of 10–20 per cent on all global imports and a dramatic escalation of trade measures against China, with potential tariffs ranging from 60 per cent to as high as 100 per cent on Chinese goods. Senior policy figures, including the prospective Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, have been associated with proposals for a 100 per cent tariff that could be implemented as early as November 2025 (*Explore Pacific Forum’s Insightful Indo-Pacific Analysis*, n.d.). Such measures would signal a shift from tariffs as bargaining instruments to tools of forced economic decoupling. The likely consequences include severe supply-chain disruption, inflationary pressures on U.S. consumers, and retaliatory responses from Beijing.

2. Alliances Shift to a “Pay-to-Play” Model

Under this approach, alliances would be evaluated through a strictly utilitarian cost–benefit framework (*Trump 2.0 Would Get Mixed Responses in the Indo-Pacific* | RAND, n.d.). Allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia will face confrontational demands for increased host-nation support and defence spending (*Trump 2.0 Would Get Mixed Responses in the Indo-Pacific* | RAND, n.d.). Key partners such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia would face intensified demands for increased host-nation support and higher defence spending. Japan has reportedly begun developing a “Plan A+” strategy to anticipate these pressures, while South Korea faces the prospect of substantial additional financial burdens. This transactional logic risks creating a fundamental challenge to allied unity, weakening the trust that underpins collective security arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS (Panda & Volpe, 2024)

3. U.S. Influence at Risk

The central paradox of a “Trump 2.0” strategy is that its methods may undermine its stated objectives. By prioritising unilateral action and framing alliances as transactional relationships, the United States risks hollowing out its own diplomatic capacity and regional influence (*A United States That Is Disintegrating and No Longer a Leader in Asia* | *East Asia Forum*, n.d.). Deep reductions in foreign aid would further diminish U.S. appeal in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, creating openings for China to expand its influence (*The Trump 2.0 Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy - U.S.-China Perception Monitor*, n.d.). As trust erodes, allies may increasingly hedge by diversifying partnerships, accelerating the emergence of a more diffuse and multipolar Indo-Pacific order in which U.S. leadership is weakened rather than reinforced.

From a theoretical perspective, the anticipated trajectory of “Trump 2.0” highlights a shift in the balance of paradigms shaping U.S. statecraft. Unilateral tariffs and transactional alliance demand reflect an intensified realist emphasis on self-help and material capability. At the same time, retreat from multilateral economic mechanisms runs counter to liberal institutionalist expectations of stability through cooperation. Trump’s escalation of economic coercion and technology restrictions aligns with strategic competition theory, framing U.S.-China rivalry as a contest for long-term structural, economic, and technological dominance rather than solely military balancing.

Implications and Challenges of the Indo-Pacific Shift

1. U.S.-China Rivalry Intensifies

The U.S. reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific has intensified strategic competition with China, as Washington’s emphasis on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is widely interpreted in Beijing as a containment strategy. In response, China has accelerated military modernisation, expanded its engagement across the Global South, and deepened economic and diplomatic ties throughout the region. U.S. advocacy of international law, maritime security, and open trade increasingly intersects with China’s assertive behaviour particularly in the South China Sea reinforcing mutual threat perceptions and hardening strategic postures on both sides (Deng et al., 2022). China’s BRI has concurrently evolved into a countervailing strategy, enabling Beijing to consolidate economic linkages and geopolitical influence while constraining U.S. strategic reach (Yan et al., 2022). This intensifying rivalry has contributed to heightened regional uncertainty, affecting trade flows, energy security, and the broader balance of power (Fu et al., 2023). It has also brought renewed attention to a widening U.S. credibility gap, as regional actors weigh Washington’s ability to sustain long-term commitments amid growing strategic demands and persistent domestic political volatility.

2. Regional Security Realignments and Strategic Hedging

Heightened U.S.-China competition is reshaping security alignments across the Indo-Pacific. U.S. allies have increasingly coordinated through minilateral frameworks such as the Quad and AUKUS, deepening defence

cooperation through joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and technological collaboration (Jose & Samudra, 2022). While these arrangements enhance deterrence and operational coordination, they also risk intensifying regional polarisation and heightening anxieties among Southeast Asian states concerned about escalation and loss of strategic autonomy.

Several ASEAN members continue to prioritise strategic independence. Indonesia has promoted the idea of an Indo-Pacific treaty as a means of preserving neutrality and regional stability, while Malaysia has sought to balance national interests without being drawn into overt great-power rivalry (Scott, 2019; Gibran et al., 2024). Similar concerns are evident across ASEAN, where expanding U.S. military activity raises fears of forced alignment between Washington and Beijing (Koga, 2023). As a result, states such as Vietnam and the Philippines increasingly adopt hedging strategies, combining security cooperation with the United States and sustained economic engagement with China (Q. Liu, 2024). These evolving alignments underscore persistent doubts about the consistency of U.S. commitments and highlight the limits of coalition-based approaches in maintaining regional stability.

3. *Economic Decoupling and Credibility Constraints*

The economic decoupling has emerged as a prominent feature of U.S.–China competition, particularly in strategic sectors linked to supply chains, technology, and critical infrastructure. The United States has promoted diversification through initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), friend-shoring, and export controls on sensitive technologies (*Assessing IPEF's New Supply Chains Agreement*, n.d.). These measures are intended to reduce vulnerability to economic coercion, drawing on lessons from China's punitive trade actions against countries such as Australia, South Korea, and Lithuania. In practice, however, decoupling has remained partial and uneven. Most Indo-Pacific economies remain deeply integrated with China, which continues to function as both their largest trading partner and a central node in global manufacturing networks (Zenglein, 2020). Consequently, many regional states pursue strategies of “selective decoupling” or “de-risking,” combining security cooperation with the United States and economic pragmatism toward China. This structural reality constrains Washington's capacity to drive large-scale economic realignment and reinforces scepticism about the depth and durability of U.S. economic alternatives, further widening the credibility gap.

4. *Impact on Smaller States*

The smaller Indo-Pacific states, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, face intensified strategic pressure as competition deepens. Lacking the capacity to align fully with either major power, these states rely on hedging and strategic ambiguity to preserve autonomy (Kuik, 2021). China's role as a major trading partner and infrastructure financier makes economic disengagement costly, while the United States remains a central provider of maritime security and defence capacity building (Chen, 2021).

The uncertainty surrounding U.S. political continuity including concerns about a potential “Trump 2.0” administration further complicates strategic decision-making. Many smaller states question Washington’s ability to sustain long-term economic and institutional engagement, prompting greater reliance on ASEAN-led mechanisms to minimise alignment risks (Stubbs, 2019). The Pacific Island countries, in particular, prioritise climate security and tend to engage pragmatically with whichever external partner delivers tangible and consistent support (Smith, 2022). These dynamics highlight regional agency while also underscoring the limits of U.S. influence in shaping Indo-Pacific order.

5. *Structural Challenges to U.S. Strategy*

The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is further constrained by competing global priorities and domestic pressures. The war in Ukraine and continuing instability in the Middle East divert U.S. resources and strategic attention, raising concerns among Indo-Pacific partners about Washington’s long-term focus and capacity for sustained engagement (Charap & Priebe, 2023; Satloff, 2023). At the same time, domestic political polarisation and fiscal constraints undermine policy coherence and limit the consistency of external commitments (Schultz, 2017; Boys, 2020)

China, for its part, has responded with a comprehensive counterstrategy that combines military modernisation, economic coercion, and diplomatic influence. Its expanding Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities aim to constrain U.S. operations across the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea (*China’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy - The Defence Horizon Journal*, n.d.). Large-scale exercises, including the planned “Strait of Thunder-2025A,” underscore sustained coercive signalling (*‘Strait Thunder-2025A’ Drill Implies Future Increase in PLA Pressure on Taiwan - Jamestown*, n.d.). Economically and diplomatically, China leverages coercive tools and the BRI to discourage regional support for U.S. access and basing (*Economic Coercion from the People’s Republic of China • Stimson Center*, n.d.). Diplomatically, China leverages its economic weight particularly through the BRI to cultivate influence in Southeast Asia and discourage regional support for U.S. military access and basing (CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA Executive Summary, n.d.).

Collectively, these dynamics intensify strategic pressure on Washington and widen the U.S. credibility gap, as regional actors increasingly question whether the United States can match China’s long-term military, economic, and diplomatic commitment to the Indo-Pacific.

Opportunities for the United States

1. *Technological Leadership*

The United States possesses significant opportunities to reinforce its Indo-Pacific strategy by leveraging its strengths in artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and green technologies. Leadership in these areas provides Washington with tools to deepen alliances, broaden cooperation with partners,

and counterbalance China's expanding technological footprint across the region. In particular, U.S. strengths in AI and cybersecurity both increasingly central to national security and economic competitiveness offer avenues for reinforcing collective resilience. Through joint initiatives aimed at enhancing cyber defences and developing AI-enabled capabilities, the United States can support partners in protecting critical infrastructure and responding to increasingly sophisticated cyber threats (Saxena et al., 2023).

U.S. leadership in green technologies presents an additional pathway for regional engagement. Supporting renewable energy transitions through collaborative solar, wind, and clean-energy projects can foster economic interdependence while addressing climate-related vulnerabilities faced by many Indo-Pacific states (Dong et al., 2023). Such cooperation not only strengthens U.S. influence in the emerging green economy but also provides an alternative to China's growing role in energy-related investment. At the same time, inconsistent funding, export-control uncertainties, and slow implementation of joint initiatives continue to constrain Washington's ability to deliver sustained and scalable technological alternatives, limiting the credibility of these efforts.

2. *Fostering Regional Stability*

Promoting regional stability remains a core U.S. objective amid intensifying strategic competition. Achieving this goal requires inclusive engagement, respect for ASEAN centrality, and sustained confidence-building in a region characterised by geopolitical pressure and deep economic interdependence. U.S. participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms and endorsement of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific signal an intention to support multilateralism and cooperative regional governance rather than exclusive bloc formation (Retnaningsih & Nizmi, 2021).

Respect for ASEAN centrality enables the United States to engage Southeast Asian states through platforms that reflect shared priorities and sensitivities. Aligning U.S. initiatives with ASEAN members' national interests can help mitigate fears of entrapment in great-power rivalry and preserve diplomatic autonomy (Siahaan & Risman, 2020; Keerthiraj & Sekiyama, 2023). Addressing non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, and public-health crises offers further opportunities to enhance regional resilience and build trust (Keerthiraj & Sekiyama, 2023). Nevertheless, fluctuations in U.S. attention, leadership transitions, and competing global crises continue to raise doubts about Washington's reliability as a long-term stabilising presence.

3. *Multilateral Engagement*

Strengthening engagement with ASEAN, Oceania, and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) presents additional opportunities for U.S. leadership. Cooperation in areas such as security, climate governance, and trade enables Washington to advance shared interests while reinforcing its strategic and normative objectives. Active participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms signals commitment to

multilateralism, which remains essential for managing complex, cross-border security challenges in the Indo-Pacific (Darwis & Wambrau, 2023).

Deeper engagement with the PIF allows the United States to address the acute vulnerabilities faced by Pacific Island states, particularly those related to climate impacts and economic fragility. Support for sustainable development and disaster-resilience initiatives aligns U.S. engagement with PIF priorities and strengthens the credibility of long-term partnership (Hartono, 2021). In parallel, engagement with regional organisations provides a platform for promoting democratic values, governance reform, and civil society participation, reinforcing U.S. normative influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific (Scott, 2013).

Taken together, these opportunities demonstrate how U.S. Indo-Pacific engagement can integrate multiple theoretical logics. Technological investment advances strategic competition objectives, capacity-building and climate cooperation reflect liberal institutionalist principles, and defence and maritime initiatives reinforce realist balance-of-power dynamics. Effectively combining these approaches offers the United States a viable pathway to sustain regional influence amid intensifying strategic competition.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the central arena of contemporary geopolitical competition, placing the United States at the forefront of efforts to shape regional order amid shifting power balances and expanding security challenges. This study has demonstrated that U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy cannot be evaluated through declaratory policy or military posture alone. Rather, its effectiveness is conditioned by the interaction of historical legacies, theoretical logics, material capabilities, normative coherence, and crucially regional perceptions.

By employing a plural theoretical framework, the analysis shows that realism explains the persistence of alliance-based deterrence, liberal institutionalism highlights the role of norms and multilateral frameworks, and strategic competition theory captures the expansion of rivalry into economic and technological domains. Taken together, these lenses reveal that credibility is not a fixed attribute of power but a relational and context-dependent outcome, shaped by how regional actors interpret U.S. commitments against the backdrop of past behaviour and present constraints. The findings suggest that U.S. credibility remains comparatively strong among formal allies characterised by dense institutional ties and shared threat perceptions. In contrast, credibility is more conditional among middle and smaller powers that prioritise strategic autonomy, economic stability, and institutional continuity. The prevalence of hedging across the Indo-Pacific reflects a rational response to uncertainty generated by capability limitations, domestic political volatility in the United States, and normative inconsistencies most notably the tension between U.S. advocacy of maritime law and its continued non-ratification of the UNCLOS.

This study also highlights the limits of a predominantly military-centric approach in a region where non-traditional security challenges increasingly shape state preferences and alignment choices. Climate change, economic resilience, digital security, and public health now weigh heavily in regional assessments of leadership and legitimacy. As the Indo-Pacific moves toward more fluid coalitions and persistent strategic ambiguity, sustained U.S. influence will depend less on expanding formal commitments than on aligning strategic ambition with available resources, strengthening economic and institutional engagement, and demonstrating consistent normative leadership grounded in regional priorities rather than episodic competition.

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