UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Chapter 3

SECURITY AND CONFLICT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Introduction

The previous two chapters have illustrated how modern states and state systems have developed in various parts of the Indo-Pacific. In this chapter, we follow up by tracing the evolution of the region's security architecture from the forced opening-up of China in the aftermath of the Opium Wars in the mid-19th century. The main protagonists in this story include external powers such as the European countries and the United States, but we also seek to give more stage time to actors from within the Indo-Pacific. We base this chapter on more traditional International Relations (IR) literature. Although this book integrates insights from various social science disciplines in studying the Indo-Pacific, security has long been a central focus for IR inquiry, making the discipline particularly well-suited to capture the region's evolving security dynamics.

We discuss these issues chronologically. We begin in the 19th century by examining how colonization dismantled the existing security architecture. We illustrate how some states, most notably Japan, successfully reconstructed their power in response to colonial pressures, while others, like China, struggled to do so. We then trace the major conflicts that erupted in these insecure times, culminating in World War II. Following the war, we explore the development of the bipolar security architecture, analyzing the main structural strategies adopted by major external powers, emerging regional centers, and smaller actors in the Indo-Pacific. Particular attention is given to post–Cold War security arrangements that contributed to the formation of the Indo-Pacific as a distinct strategic region, as well as the ongoing transformations driven by China's rise. Lastly, we illustrate key contemporary security flashpoints, including the US-China rivalry, territorial disputes, and the

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North Korean (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) nuclear issue, demonstrating how they continue to fuel regional insecurity.

Before proceeding, it is important to discuss key IR theories that help understand the mechanisms and actors shaping both regional and global security orders. Throughout the chapter, we show how traditional security concepts in IR, such as balance of power, deterrence, and relative gains, have been instrumental in shaping the establishment of the Indo-Pacific. The rise of China has further driven the diffusion of the Indo-Pacific idea into regional institutions and the foreign policy imaginaries of regional actors. Designed as a security order, the Indo-Pacific framework aims to link like-minded countries into a new web of alliances that uphold the status quo. Yet, questions remain about its sustainability, the extent to which regional actors genuinely share its underlying norms and visions, and whether it is truly the most effective system for ensuring peace in the region.

Security, Institutions, and the Rise of the Indo-Pacific

Security orders, mechanisms and actors have long been important venues of IR research, with various theories offering accounts of how stable orders differ from unstable ones. Recently, an increasing bulk of scholarship has applied these theoretical standpoints to make sense of the emerging Indo-Pacific demarcation.

Realists, preoccupied with state survival within an anarchic international system, contend that the Indo-Pacific is an old-fashioned balancing strategy directed at countering China's rise. According to He (2018), three main realist rationales support this idea. First, the Indo-Pacific highlights India's role, which had largely been excluded from the earlier Asia-Pacific framework. Although India is not yet a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC) and its influence on regional security remains limited, it is seen as a natural balancing force against China, driving the efforts to incorporate it into the regional security architecture.

Second, the Indo-Pacific offers a strategic space for alliance formation beyond the traditional hub-and-spoke system—a security alliance system in which Washington serves as the hub and the US Asian allies including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia as spokes with a bilateral connection with the hub, but with only a loose connection among themselves (Ikenberry 2004; Park 2011). This system, which we will discuss in greater detail later on, was in place for most of the post-war era, and although Obama's pivot strategy sought to multilateralize this approach, it achieved limited success. The Indo-Pacific framework, however, provides a platform for forging new strategic partnerships among like-minded partners. Third, realists argue that there is a common threat from China across many Asian countries, which prompts cooperation despite disagreements among them. Seen through this lens, the Indo-Pacific is a strategic construct rooted in balance-of-power rationale, designed primarily to protect the national interest of its founders (cf. e.g. Beeson and Lee-Brown 2021; Pan 2014).

In contrast to realist rationales, liberal IR theory offers an economic and institutional logic in the account of the emergence and institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific. As the world's leading hub for trade and growth, proponents of the Indo-Pacific argue that it has been fostered by the institutional foundations laid by organizations like the East Asian Summit (EAS), which accepted India, Australia, and New Zealand in 2005 (Medcalf 2016). The EAS—also incorporating the United States—alongside other regional bodies such as APEC and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations "Plus" (ASEAN+) organizations, has provided a solid footing for further institutional development. Additionally, the growing volume of trade among Indo-Pacific nations has reinforced this process (see also He 2018; for a larger discussion about institutions in the region, see Chapter 5).

Lastly, social constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas, values, and social norms as constitutive factors of state behavior and international systems. Constructivists posit that the Indo-Pacific is a socially constructed concept built on shared values and identities (see He 2018; Hayes 2022). Democracy, in this view, serves as the social glue that has facilitated the initial acceptance of the Indo-Pacific format, especially among the four members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—who agreed to security coordination through the Dialogue in 2007. Value-guided diplomacy, aligned with the concept of a "rules-based order," has been central to several diplomatic initiatives, notably Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.

While these three theories give distinct accounts of the emergence and continued prominence of the Indo-Pacific, each has its limitations. Although realists assume that the Indo-Pacific nations share a strong interest in fostering this regional framework, there has been significant reluctance among the main players. Australia's lack of interest under PM Kevin Rudd led to the freezing of the Quad alliance in 2008—just a year after its inception. India has been hesitant to balance China directly, and the United States has continued to prioritize the former Asia-Pacific framework and the key alliances that underpin the hub-and-spoke system. The cooperative effects of the common threat thesis are also overstated. Following the 2008 financial crisis, China emerged as the largest trading partner for most Asian countries, and several Southeast Asian states have opted for a hedging strategy rather than directly balancing Beijing. These factors have weakened the Indo-Pacific idea and challenged the realist explanation for its adoption.

The liberal argument that economic and institutional momentum favors the Indo-Pacific is also weak. As we elaborate further in Chapter 4, the economic center of Asia continues to revolve around the Asia-Pacific framework, with trade levels in East and Southeast Asia still surpassing those in South Asia. Additionally, the rise of minilateralism, encapsulated by the Quad and the Australia–UK–US trilateral agreement (AUKUS), further problematizes the notion of an inclusive and connected Indo-Pacific. The constructivist preoccupation with shared norms is similarly problematic. Grounding shared values in democracy excludes many countries from the region, where democratic values have either been in decline,

or have never fully taken root, at least by Western standards. The lack of strong institutions across the region further complicates the idea that shared values exist on which a durable order can be built (see He 2018; Qiao-Franco, Karmazin, and Kolmaš 2024).

Rather than perceiving the Indo-Pacific as a coherent demarcation, it may be more useful to grasp the sub-regional differences and connections in security strategies. For instance, Southeast Asia exhibits shared security values, as the region has developed a unique security system based on informal negotiations and personal connections among states. Known as the ASEAN Way, this system focuses on diffusing tensions through mediation and conflict prevention. While it may indeed be the case that the relative peace that has prevailed in the region in recent times could be partly attributed to ASEAN's constructive role, this does not extend to the entire Indo-Pacific. Having outlined the limitations of existing theoretical accounts of the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, we now turn to the story of the historical development of security orders in Asia, providing a foundation for readers to arrive at more informed explanations. While our primary focus is the Indo-Pacific, we trace the evolution of the security system back to colonial times.

Colonization and the Road to the War

Although not completely without conflict, the security system in East and Southeast Asia was relatively stable prior to the influx of European influence in the 19th century. Changes brought about by colonization were profound, and one could argue (Simone 2001) that the modern political systems of Asian countries, as well as the contemporary security system of the Indo-Pacific, can only be fully understood through the lens of these historical processes. First of all, the British Opium Wars dismantled China's supremacy in Asia, both in terms of its on-the-ground position and in the minds of other Asian countries. The colonization by the French, Dutch, British, Americans, and later the Japanese in South and Southeast Asia swept away indigenous polities and imposed new systems tailored to the growing imperial populations hungry for resources and products.

Colonization practices of European powers varied significantly, but in each colonized society, a push toward national awakening resulted in the formation of modern versions of state-building nationalism. Besides propelling local resistance against the colonizers, the rise of nationalism also generated new cleavages that complicated relationships in pre-war Asia. Japan, most notably, began to assert its new role in the region. Narrowly escaping colonization following the arrival of Commodore Perry's Black ships in the 1850s, the Meiji Restoration set the stage for the conception of a modern, Western-style polity, defined by a centralized political organization, a modern military and police power, and the adoption of modern technology to maintain parity with Western powers (for social changes, see e.g. Hayes 2017). These changes, together with the weakening of China during the Opium Wars, fueled Japan's desire to shift the international hierarchy in Asia. Once

an on-and-off tributary state to China, Japan's new technocratic leadership, with China sidelined, seized the opportunity to redefine Asia's power structure. Disillusioned by perceived Western racism and Japan's low status vis-à-vis Western powers (evidenced by Japan's inferior position at the Washington Naval Conference in 1921–1922 and discriminatory anti-Japanese laws in the United States prior to World War II), Tokyo sought to establish itself as a respected great power country, on equal footing with Western powers.

Under the pretense of liberating the newly established Korean Empire from Chinese influence, Tokyo invaded Korea and subsequently Manchuria. The six months of the First Sino-Japanese War laid bare the developmental differences between the two nations. Japan's Western-style military, equipped with modern tactical knowledge and equipment, was diametrically different from the disorganized, low morale, and ill-equipped Chinese forces (some of which fought with outdated weapons such as spears and bows). Japan's victory set the stage for its occupation of Taiwan (1895–1945) and Korea (1910–1945). Buoyed by its successes and wary of growing Russian influence in Korea, Japan continued to shape Asian security by targeting another regional power. The Russo-Japanese War of 1905, however, was a much different experience. Although plagued by logistical shortcomings and their own belief in superiority over the Japanese, the Russians were a much more formidable enemy than the Chinese. They were better equipped, skilled in warfare tactics and strategy, and had a superior number of ground forces. And yet, a string of Japanese naval victories around Port Arthur was enough for Tsar Nicholas II to agree to a peace treaty signed in Portsmouth in 1905 (see Esthus 1981). Japan's victory over Russia marked the first time an Asian nation had defeated a traditional European superpower, profoundly shaping Japan's modern identity.

World War I cemented the emerging security architecture in East Asia. Japan emerged from the war as one of the major powers, acquiring new territories and securing a permanent seat on the Council of the League of Nations. China, meanwhile, had established a republic led by the well-known doctor Sun Yat-sen and his Kuomintang (KMT) party in 1912, but the war only worsened the already chaotic situation in the Middle Power. Having lost Shandong Province to Japan as a result of the Treaty of Versailles—a decision perceived as unjust by many in China—the cohesiveness of what had once been a dominant power began to crumble. By 1923, just 11 years after the Republic's founding, whatever unity it possessed was shattered by competing warlords, nationalists, and communists. In the ensuing chaos, the Chinese provinces of Tibet and Outer Mongolia broke away (Woodruff 2002). The collapse of the Chinese polity led KMT to focus on uniting against the warlords—a task that was upheld by Chiang Kai-shek following Sun's death in 1925. Chiang's campaign to reunify China was brutal, albeit successful. However, the success of this campaign propelled Japan to invade Manchuria in 1931, establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo to prevent the consolidation of a strong Chinese republic. Despite this external threat, Chiang viewed the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) as a greater ideological enemy, famously stating that "the Japanese are a disease of the skin, but the communists are a disease of the heart." The Long March, in which up to 100 thousand followers of the CCP were forced to leave the Jiangxi soviet and flee the KMT forces in 1933–1934, helped Mao Zedong to secure the central position in the party, and allowed him to spread communist ideas throughout Chinese society. During the war against Japan, a fragile alliance was forged between the CCP and Chiang. This partnership allowed the Communists to further consolidate their power. However, following Japan's defeat in 1945, the alliance quickly unraveled, leading to the resumption of the Chinese Civil War. The conflict culminated in a Communist victory in 1949, which resulted in the KMT retreating to Taiwan and the establishment of the People's Republic of China on the mainland.

World War I also had a profound impact on India and South Asian countries. The British war effort led to the mobilization of more than a million Indian soldiers and laborers, and the sacrifices made by Indians in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East fueled demands for greater autonomy and representation within the British Empire. This participation also raised awareness of global political dynamics among Indian elites, further intensifying the nationalist movement led by figures such as Mahatma Gandhi. In other parts of South Asia, the war similarly spurred political and social change, albeit in distinct ways. In Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), wartime demands for plantation exports such as tea and rubber strained the local economy but also highlighted colonial inequalities, igniting nascent nationalist sentiments. Afghanistan, strategically positioned as a buffer state between British India and Russia, leveraged the war's distractions to assert greater autonomy, culminating in the Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919) and its eventual recognition as an independent nation. The broader South Asian region saw increased awareness of anti-colonial struggles worldwide, inspired by the weakening of European powers during the war and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. These developments collectively undermined the legitimacy of colonial rule, setting the stage for a century of decolonization and state-building across the region (for a broader discussion, see Franke 2009; Omissi 1999).

Japan, meanwhile, continued its campaign to place itself at the top of the Asian political hierarchy. Following the Marco Polo Bridge incident in 1937, Tokyo continued to invade mainland China, capturing Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing in the process. Japan's ambition for Asian domination extended beyond China, as it expanded its reach into Southeast Asia, including Burma, French Indochina, and Indonesia. Only after the engagement of the United States in the Pacific Ocean theater following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, did the tide of war begin to turn. After key Japanese defeats at battles in Guam, the Philippines, and Okinawa, it became clear that Japan's dream of creating a new order in Asia under its leadership would not materialize. Following the Soviet declaration of war against Japan in 1945, and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, the Japanese government under Prime Minister

Kentaro Suzuki was forced to surrender to American general Douglas MacArthur on September 2, 1945, aboard the USS Missouri in Edo Bay.

The Consolidation of the Post-War Security System

The transformations brought about by World War II were profound, reshaping the Indo-Pacific in ways that would define its political and security landscape for decades. The decolonization of South and Southeast Asia ushered in new states, each with its own security agenda. In South Asia, the anti-colonial movement, having consolidated its influence, forced the British government to end its rule over the subcontinent in 1947. British India was partitioned along religious lines, forming the independent India and Pakistan. The partition was accompanied by brutal sectarian violence in several provinces, including Punjab and Bengal, which were divided between India and Pakistan, and a mass migration between the newly established states, with more than 12 million people displaced as Hindus and Sikhs moved to India and Muslims to Pakistan. The negative geopolitical effects of this partition—including the disputed status of Jammu and Kashmir provinces (see Box 3.1)—continue to plague the bilateral relations for decades. Elsewhere, Japan reverted to its 19th-century boundaries (inclusive of the Ryukyu archipelago), and China split into the mainland People's Republic of China (PRC) and the KMT-governed Republic of China (ROC) based in Taiwan—each claiming to be the legitimate ruler of all of China, including Taiwan.

These changes were systemic, marking the full integration of Asian states into a global system dominated by the United States, Europe, and the USSR. The idea of modern sovereignty with strictly defined boundaries—alien to pre–19th-century Asia—became one of the most cherished principles in the post–World War II period. The adaptation to this system had profound consequences, particularly in fueling territorial conflicts and shaping security policies. Many newly formed states, celebrating their long-awaited independence, readily embraced the concept of sovereignty and placed it at the core of their security policies. These new states prioritized survival against both external (superpowers) and internal (mostly communist insurgencies) threats, allowing for sometimes questionable methods and suppressing Western-defined human rights in the process. The conflicts regarding the demarcation of their borders (such as the Sino-Soviet border clashes and the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir), about the control of archipelagos in the East and South China Sea (the Paracel and Spratly Islands and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands), or internal struggles against communist guerillas and uprisings (such as in Thailand and the Philippines), exemplified how Indo-Pacific countries internalized and operationalized these newly adapted concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity in their policies and strategic outlooks (cf. Simone 2001, 360–380).

Another facet of the post-World War II systemic change was tied to the commencement of the Cold War, which quickly spread all around the world, bringing with it proxy wars and a bipolar mentality of "us vs. them." In Asia, the Cold

BOX 3.1 THE KASHMIR CONFLICT

The Kashmir conflict is a territorial dispute mostly between India and Pakistan (but also partly China) regarding the ownership of the northernmost province on the Indian subcontinent. The conflict dates back to the partition of India following decolonization in 1947, when both newly formed countries claimed the entire region formerly composed of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. However, the roots of the dispute extend well beyond the partition, shaped by historical, political, and ethnic complexities. Since 1947, Kashmir has remained divided between Pakistan and India, the latter of which has controlled the bigger part of the disputed region.

Since 1947, the conflict has erupted into three wars and multiple skirmishes. The first war erupted right after the partition between 1947 and 1948, when Pakistani militias, later joined by the Pakistani army, invaded Kashmir to prevent its full integration into India. India successfully repelled the attack, securing control over roughly two-thirds of the territory, while Pakistan retained the remainder. Mediation efforts by the United Nations remained inconclusive, and failed to produce a lasting resolution. The conflict reignited in 1965 when Pakistan attempted to incite an insurgency against Indian rule, leading to another war. Further hostilities occurred in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War. The Simla Agreement, signed in 1972, sought to de-escalate tensions by establishing the Line of Control (LoC) as the de facto border, with both sides pledging not to alter it unilaterally.

Despite this agreement, periodic clashes have continued. In 1999, a number of skirmishes erupted along the LoC, particularly in Kargil, where Pakistani forces infiltrated Indian positions beyond the LoC, prompting India to push them back. More recently, tensions flared up again in 2019 when India revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, and divided the state into two union territories, triggering a fresh wave of unrest and diplomatic friction.

War's influence was particularly pronounced, as the American policy of containment shaped the security landscape of many Asian countries. This policy was rooted in George Kennan's Long Telegram and his 1947 article *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* (published under the pseudonym "X" in Foreign Affairs). Kennan argued that Soviet leaders used communist ideology to characterize the external world as hostile, allowing them to justify their continued grip on power despite lacking popular support. According to his analysis, the ultimate goal of the Soviet Union, in this hostile surrounding, was not to reconcile with the West, but to spread its formal and informal influence all around the world and undermine the capitalist state system (see e.g. Gaddis 2011; Leffler 2007). Although Kennan's work did not offer any specific course of action, his ideas laid the foundation

for a new US foreign policy approach in Asia. Influenced by Kennan's work and Nicholas Spykman's Rimland theory—and later institutionalized through the Truman doctrine—the containment strategy called for direct American intervention whenever and wherever communism would spread. The objective was not only to prevent communist takeovers that could compromise regional security and prosperity, but also to safeguard American interests globally (Kissinger 1979).

The two poles of the bipolar system took opposing sides in many of the emerging postwar conflicts in Asia (with perhaps the exception of India, which tried to navigate a path of non-alignment, as will be illustrated later). The Korean War of 1950–1953, in which Washington supported the southern leader Syngman Rhee and the Soviets and the Chinese the northern leader Kim Il Sung, was the first time these two powers clashed in Asia, marking what later became known as a proxy war (Berman and Lake 2019). Despite heavy casualties on both sides, the war ultimately ended in a stalemate. After three years of brutal fighting, neither side was able to secure a decisive victory, paving the way for the cemented separation of North and South Korea along the 38th parallel for decades to come. The Korean War, however, was only the beginning. Across Asia, local insurgencies, ideological battles, and struggles for independence soon became entangled in the broader Cold War rivalry. From communist uprisings in South and Southeast Asia to the First and Second Indochina Wars, nations across the region found themselves forced to choose between competing spheres of influence, further entrenching Cold War divisions.

Washington's strategy for consolidating its sphere of influence in post-war Asia has often been labeled as the hub-and-spoke system. Unlike the multilateral security framework that emerged in Europe through institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Washington's approach in Asia relied on individual security agreements rather than a unified regional bloc. Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002) argued that this difference stemmed from American perceptions of cultural and political affinity—while the United States saw Europe as sharing its identity and institutions, it viewed Asia as more distant and thus did not prioritize a comparable multilateral structure. The hub-and-spoke system was only loosely institutionalized. In fact, the institutions that did emerge in post-war Asia often failed to make a meaningful security impact. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), for instance, was a watered-down version of NATO, with basic collective security goals, but lacking a binding collective defense clause akin to NATO's Article 5. The organization, which was established in 1954, failed to advance common security and was abandoned two decades later in 1977.

The US-Japan alliance was understood as the lynchpin of American security presence in Asia. This alliance played a key role in deterring the expansion of Soviet power and communism in East Asia. The United States offered Japan (and to some extent other countries in the region) a bargain: It placed them under American security protection, allowed for easier US market access and various forms of assistance, in exchange for diplomatic, economic, and logistic support for the

United States as it led the wider, American-centered anti-Communist post-war order. From the beginning, the hub-and-spoke system was complemented with a more multilateral economic order in Asia. Believing that development would grant Asian allies a larger role in tackling the communist threat and providing regional security, the United States facilitated the economic reconstruction of East Asia, particularly Japan. For several commentators (most notably John Ikenberry), Asia greatly benefited from this system. Despite its lack of multilateralism, the alliance system proved to be durable, predictable, and mutually agreeable, "paving the way for deeper economic integration and political cooperation" (Ikenberry 2004, 357). According to Ikenberry, the system has also been crucial for the emergence of an open regional (and global) world economy, as US security guarantees enabled Asian economies to pursue trade-oriented growth strategies, fostering the rapid rise of Japan and the "Asian Tigers"—South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—as export-driven economic powerhouses (see Chapter 4).

While this may be the case, the system also had its pitfalls. Washington was largely unwilling to accept any reduction in its political autonomy and acted more or less as a hegemon in the Asian regional order. Although—as Ikenberry illustrated—several countries benefited from this, the encapsulation of the region in a set of bilateral ties prevented the formation of a truly multilateral organization in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN came perhaps closest to fulfilling this role, but compared to the European Union and NATO, it remained loosely institutionalized and lacked a collective security arrangement. The subsequent Cold War polarization between the US-aligned and communist blocs further obstructed durable political ties across Asia. Moreover, American security influence in the region had its limits. The direct US engagement in the Second Indochina War (commonly known as the Vietnam War, 1955–1973) escalated into a protracted and devastating conflict, ultimately unsuccessful in its attempt to curb the spread of communism. North Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh (and after his death in 1969 Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap) built on its previous successes in driving out the French colonial forces in the First Indochina War (1946–1954), and after the United States withdrawal in 1973, succeeded in uniting the country under communist rule in 1975.

Wary of superpower influence and preoccupied with their own struggles for sovereignty, many countries in South and Southeast Asia tried to avoid Cold War bipolar confrontation. For India, independence in 1947 brought immediate security concerns with the partition and the creation of Pakistan, leading to large-scale violence and population displacements. The conflict over Jammu and Kashmir, which escalated into the First Indo-Pakistani War (1947–1948), became a defining security challenge, anchoring India's strategic focus on territorial integrity and regional dominance (Box 3.1). Under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, India pursued a non-alignment strategy to navigate Cold War tensions, resisting exclusive ties with either of the superpowers. However, this policy did not preclude pragmatic security measures, such as military modernization and strong defense institutions. The 1962 Sino-Indian War exposed vulnerabilities in India's defense posture, prompting a

recalibration of its military strategy and closer cooperation with the Soviet Union to counterbalance China. Other South Asian countries faced distinct but interconnected security dilemmas during this period. Pakistan adopted a security strategy centered on countering India, resulting in a deep militarization of its state apparatus. Its alignment with the United States and membership in Cold War alliances such as SEATO and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) reflected an attempt to secure external support against Indian dominance, although these alliances often left Pakistan at the periphery of great-power priorities. Smaller states like Nepal and Bhutan adopted strategies of cautious neutrality while seeking to maintain their sovereignty amidst India–China competition. Afghanistan, meanwhile, pursued a policy of non-alignment similar to India's, balancing Soviet and Western influences while grappling with internal tribal and ethnic tensions.

Non-alignment was eventually formalized in a collective push to avoid bipolar confrontation. Led by India and Indonesia (along with a few others, initially with the involvement of Mao's China), the 1961 Belgrade Conference, drawing on the outcomes of the 1955 Bandung Conference, established the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a third force in the bipolar global system. Over time, more than 120 countries joined in a centralized effort to achieve greater representation in the Western-dominated global institutions and politics. The 1979 Havana Declaration encapsulated NSM's core objectives of ensuring "national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries." The "Third World" countries did not merely try to shield themselves from the spheres of influence that the first and second worlds were creating. They attempted to re-establish the world order in a more equitable way. This aspiration was reflected in the formation of the G77 group in the United Nations and the push for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). The NIEO called for changes in "trade, industrialization, agricultural production, finance, and transfer of technology" to reduce the developing world's dependency on the Global North. Its legacy was, however, mixed—only a few of these ideas came to fruition, and only minor changes were implemented in international organizations.

Erosion of Bipolarity and the Fall of the Soviet Union

Although the bipolar system remained relatively stable in the 1950s, it began to waver in the 1960s. Following several heated confrontations, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the two superpowers came to realize that some form of dialogue was necessary in order to keep the system stable and predictable. A form of détente entered the confrontation, in the shape of a series of talks between the United States and the Soviet Union, resulting in the signature of several agreements, including the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968 and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) treaties of the 1970s. Power shifts became visible in Asia, too. Growing tensions between the Soviet Union and China, which had been simmering since the 1950s with Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies and Soviet reluctance

to share nuclear technology, erupted into open conflict in the late 1960s. In 1969, an undeclared military conflict between the two main communist countries transpired, culminating in a two-decade uneasy relationship. The conflict stemmed from the overall deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relationship on the personal, ideological, diplomatic, and strategic levels and diverging territorial claims. In 1969, skirmishes broke out near the Zhenbao (Damansky) Island in the eastern part of the disputed border, but also along its western part. Although China's leadership was preparing for a potential Soviet nuclear strike, the confrontation ultimately did not escalate into a full-scale war and eventually toned down (Lüthi 2012). Despite its resolution, however, the Sino-Soviet rift played a significant role in the transformation of the bipolar system in Asia.

Remarkably, by the late 1960s, China's perception of the United States began to change. Until then, bilateral relationships had been virtually non-existent, with Beijing deeply resentful of American influence in Asia, particularly Washington's support for the KMT in Taiwan. The United States had recognized Chiang Kai-shek as the only legitimate ruler of all China, and despite an initial non-intervention stance, President Truman sent the Seventh Fleet of the US Navy to patrol the Taiwan Strait after the outbreak of the Korean War, effectively putting Taiwan under American protection. The ROC maintained its stance of uniting China under its leadership even after Dwight D. Eisenhower took the presidency from Truman in 1952. Understanding the ROC as a part of the US policy of containment, Eisenhower supported the ROC (materially and economically) once hostilities broke out in 1954 around Kinmen and the Matsu Islands (later dubbed the First Strait Crisis). Perhaps also because of repeated American threats of nuclear retaliation, the PRC eventually agreed to a ceasefire. The issue remained, however, unresolved, leading to another Taiwan Strait crisis three years later (Garver 1997).

By the late 1960s, however, past American support for Taiwan no longer proved an insurmountable obstacle to rapprochement between Washington and Beijing. Recognizing fractures within the communist bloc, the US saw an opportunity for a strategic reorientation, which could advance its interests, dismantle the communist unity, and help constitute a stable security order in Asia. US President Lyndon Johnson advocated for a "free flow of ideas and goods" between the two countries, and in his 1966 speech called for reconciliation between them (Panda 1997). China—struggling with a myriad of internal issues resulting from Mao's Cultural Revolution—was slow to reciprocate. Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, continued diplomatic efforts, arguing that the US could no longer act as the world's policeman. His "Nixon Doctrine" signaled a reduction of US military presence in Asia, leading to the quiet withdrawal of the Seventh Fleet circling Taiwan and a loosening of trade restrictions on China. In 1970, Beijing finally agreed to direct talks, meeting with American representatives in Warsaw. The diplomatic thaw culminated in Beijing's return to the UN Security Council, Nixon's historic visit to China in February 1972, and Washington's adoption of the One China Policy—marking a strategic reversal for both sides.

For Beijing, the talks with Washington might never have happened without rising tensions with the Soviet Union and Mao's retreat from power in the late 1960s, driven by the disastrous effects of the Cultural Revolution. For Washington, this diplomatic breakthrough was a strategic victory. As Henry Kissinger put it, "burdened by the traumas of Vietnam, yet determined to shape a new era of IR, the Nixon administration was convinced that contact with this one quarter humanity could restore a new perspective to (our) diplomacy" (Kissinger 1979, 685). The effects on Asia were immense. Together with the rise of the Third World after the Bandung Conference, the Sino-American rapprochement contributed to the erosion of bipolarity and raised questions about the continued necessity of containment. Japan, for instance, had previously sought diplomatic engagement with China but was restrained by Washington's opposition. Once the United States re-established diplomatic relations with Beijing, Tokyo was swift to follow, signing a Joint Communique in 1972 and the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978.

Notwithstanding warming US-China relations, US-Soviet confrontation persisted in Asia, albeit somewhat tempered by the ongoing SALT and START talks. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, however, reignited Cold War hostilities. Washington responded by backing the Mujahideen resistance, prolonging the Soviet military entanglement, and exacerbating the USSR's financial strain. This ultimately accelerated Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost reforms that eventually loosened the communist party's grip on the Soviet Union.

While US-Soviet bipolarity continued to define Asia's security system until the 1990s, a new pattern of polycentrism emerged. China's rise under Deng Xiaoping's technocratic leadership, Japan's economic ascent and gradual security recalibration, and ASEAN's consolidation as a third force in Asia all contributed to the transformation of the once firmly bipolar regional architecture. Similarly, India—a long proponent of non-alignment with a Soviet-leaning tilt—began recalibrating its foreign policy in the 1980s. Seeking a more balanced and engaged global posture, Delhi pursued closer ties with both Washington and Beijing, as well as other developed countries. The Indo-Pacific gradually emerged as an important venue of India's foreign relations, marked by initiatives such as the neighborhood first policy, the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985, and the "Look East" policy, aimed at forging more extensive economic and strategic partnerships with East Asian countries, including Japan and China.

By the late 1980s, the previous dominance of security as the primary driver of IR had largely faded. Instead, economic cooperation emerged as a key force shaping relations across Asia. New actors, including strengthened international institutions with the UN as its centerpiece (and the financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Japan-led Asian Development Bank), transnational corporations, and International Non-Governmental Organizations, became prominent at both regional and global levels. Their growing

influence contributed to the eventual fall of bipolarity at the beginning of the 1990s (Simone 2001).

Constitution of the Post-Cold War Security Regime

For Indo-Pacific states, these changes brought great expectations and new opportunities, but also significant uncertainties about their security in a rapidly evolving international setting. Key questions emerged: What would happen to American policy toward Asia once the rationale for containment disappeared? Would the continued rise of Japan, India, and China result in a security dilemma or even new confrontations? Could a new, multilateral, international order be achieved, and through what policy means? And would the end of the bipolar system lead to an increase in both active and frozen conflicts?

Indeed, the system in the 1990s underwent a radical transformation. The most significant shift was systemic—the retreat of the Soviet Union left the United States in a position of unrivalled dominance, a period often referred to as the "unipolar moment" (Ikenberry 2004; Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth 2009). With overwhelming economic, military, and technological advantage, Washington faced virtually no immediate constraints on exercising its power abroad. The economic bubble crisis striking Japan in 1990–1991 and a somewhat slower economic growth of the European Communities/Union further reinforced American primacy. Some scholars even argued that US hard-power capabilities were so overwhelming that other states could not even realistically hope to counterbalance the United States (Layne 2006, 7). In Asia, however, many were worried. Due to the end of the Cold War, many of the US allies in the region, including Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, and Thailand, feared abandonment and the potential rise of a security dilemma in the region.

Outside of these systemic fears, previously suppressed conflicts resurfaced, complicating hopes for a stable post-Cold War order. Several territorial disputes—including those over the Malacca Strait, the South China Sea (the Paracel and Spratly Islands), the Kuril Islands, the East China Sea (Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands), the Dokdo islets, and Kashmir—once again became focal points of regional tensions. Concerns grew over maritime security, particularly regarding the protection of vital sea lanes between Malaysia and Indonesia. The dangers from the split Korean peninsula were made obvious once again as the Soviet aid toward North Korea disappeared with Gorbachev's reforms and North Korea found itself in the midst of the worst famine since its foundation. Meanwhile, China's rise became an increasing concern, particularly as fears mounted over a potential US retreat from Asia. India, at the same time, recalibrated its foreign policy, prompting other regional powers to reconsider their own strategic responses.

The rapid spread of globalization and Asia's deeper integration into the global market introduced new dimensions of insecurity. Concerns grew over non-traditional threats, including economic vulnerability, market pressures, and intensified interstate

competition (Simone 2001; Ikenberry 2004; Ross 1999). It is no surprise then, that many analysts predicted that Asia was "ripe for rivalry" and conflict. As Friedberg (1993, 7) warned:

> In Asia, the soothing forces (that can be found in Europe) are either absent or of dubious strength and permanence. While civil wars and ethnic strife will continue for some time to smolder along Europe's peripheries, in the long run, it is Asia that seems far more likely to be the cockpit of great power conflict. The half millennium during which Europe was the world's primary generator of war (as well as of wealth and knowledge) is coming to a close. But, for better and for worse, Europe's past could be Asia's future.

Not all of these concerns applied to every country, nor did they all reach a heated stage, but they reflected the anxieties that accompanied the end of bipolarity. However, these concerns have not fully materialized (at least not yet). There are several reasons for this—or more precisely, several evolving dynamics in the region that continue to shape its security. These include (1) the continued American presence in—rather than withdrawal from—Asia, (2) the undeniable rise of China and the transformation of its foreign policy from a largely social approach in the 1990s and 2000s into a more assertive stance in the 2010s, and (3) the security reconstruction/rise of several Asian powers including Japan, India, Australia and ASEAN. Let's break these three down to illustrate key contemporary security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

American Pivot to Asia Revisited

Despite widespread fears in Asia about US abandonment, this never truly happened. In the 1990s, the number of Asia-centered personnel in the US foreign service and State Department stagnated or fell, and Washington signaled that regional actors (especially Japan) should take on more responsibility for keeping the regional order, but Washington never retreated from Asia. The Cold War-era hub-and-spoke system that fundamentally defined American policy toward the region remained virtually intact. Ikenberry argues that this persistence was not accidental but strategic. American security dominance was so overwhelming that the bilateral security order it had established in Asia effectively served American interests without requiring the compromise inherent in a multilateral order (Ikenberry 2004, 360). Rather than transforming the hub-and-spoke bilateral system into a multilateral one, Washington regionalized its existing bilateral architecture to maximize its strategic advantages. The 1997 New Guidelines for the Japan-US Security Alliance, for instance, reaffirmed the 100,000 strong deployment of American military personnel in Japan, and expanded the scope of the alliance to "dealing with situations that may emerge in the areas surrounding Japan" (US Department of State 1996).

George W. Bush's friendship with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi further solidified and strengthened the alliance in the 2000s, leading some observers to call this period the high point of the Japan-US partnership. Despite the visibly growing economic strength of China, Bush kept a steady and predictable policy during both of his terms, paving the way for Barack Obama's later "Pivot to Asia" (Silove 2016). Bush also initiated a thaw in US-India relations—previously muted during the Cold War years—by signing an agreement on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. These successes, however, were not matched by a coherent North Korea policy. President Bill Clinton had taken the first multilateral steps to address North Korea's nuclear program back in 1994, when he—after coming close to a war with the embattled and impoverished North Korea in 1993—initiated the so-called Agreed Framework. The framework was supposed to provide Pyongyang with two nuclear-powered light water reactors (LWR for electricity generation in exchange for a halt to its uranium enrichment program, which could be used for the construction of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The agreement initially soothed the tensions between the two countries, led Pyongyang to rejoin the NPT, and allowed International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of the Yongbyon nuclear facility. But delays in American (and allied) contributions to the LWRs—largely due to congressional disapproval—undermined the deal, and the fragile concord eventually crumbled.

By the time George Bush Jr. formulated his policy on North Korea, the findings of the 1999 Perry Report had made clear both the successes and the limitations of the Agreed Framework. The report acknowledged that the agreement had "succeeded in verifiably freezing North Korean plutonium production at Yongbyon" by "stopping plutonium production at that facility" so that North Korea had "at most a small amount of fissile material it may have secreted away from operations prior to 1994." However, it also raised "serious concerns about possible continuing nuclear weapons-related work in the DPRK" (US Department of State 1999). These concerns were validated when North Korean leader Kim Jong Il later admitted to ongoing nuclear weapons development (Harnish 2002). In response, Bush moved to toughen his stance on Pyongyang by dismantling the remnants of the Agreed Framework, and placing North Korea on the "rogue states" list. Yet, despite this initial coercive diplomacy, Bush virtually ruled out military intervention—unlike in Iraq—and even removed North Korea from the US' terrorism list in 2008 after several rounds of Six Party Talks, which were headed by China and included the US, Russia, Japan, and North and South Korea. For many, this was somewhat puzzling, especially since North Korea had successfully conducted its first nuclear test in 2006 (see Box 3.2).

Barack Obama, who entered the White House in 2008, in many ways adopted this up-and-down relationship with North Korea. His broader Asian policy was, however, reformulated into a new and coherent strategy, diverging from Bush's Asia policy. Formulated with the help of Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the Pivot to Asia, as it became known, had five pillars: (1) reaffirming

BOX 3.2 THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CONUNDRUM

As of 2024, the international community asserted that the DPRK possessed approximately 30–40 nuclear weapons and the capacity to produce enough fissile material at the Yongbyon nuclear facility for an additional six to seven weapons per year. Over the last two decades, the DPRK has conducted a series of six nuclear tests of increasing yield, in 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016, and most recently in 2017. North Korea also possesses various delivery systems that include modified Soviet-era short-, medium-, and long-range missiles from the Hwasong series, as well as long-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) from the Pukguksong series. North Korea claims that its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) the Hwasong-15, has a range of 13,000 km, theoretically putting Washington D.C., France, and the United Kingdom within reach. Several scientists have, however, claimed that equipping the missile with a normal-sized payload would reduce its effective range.

There have been at least three periods of the so-called "North Korean nuclear crises." The first crisis emerged in 1993 when the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) concluded that the DPRK was not in compliance with the NPT. In response, North Korea threatened to withdraw from the treaty, prompting a multilateral effort to contain its nuclear ambitions. This led to the Agreed Framework (1994), under which North Korea agreed to halt its nuclear weapons program in exchange for assistance in developing a peaceful nuclear energy sector.

The second crisis came in 2002, when evidence surfaced that the DPRK had continued its WMD program despite claims to the contrary. In response, the United States accused the DPRK of violating the Agreed Framework and halted oil shipments promised under the agreement. This led to the framework's collapse in 2002, and in 2003, the DPRK withdrew from the NPT. A new diplomatic effort, the Six Party Talks, led by China and involving the United States, Russia, Japan, and both Koreas, was launched to address the crisis. While this initiative achieved some temporary diplomatic breakthroughs, it ultimately failed to prevent the continuation of the DPRK's WMD program.

The third nuclear crisis unfolded in 2017–2018, triggered by a series of North Korean nuclear and missile tests. These escalations led to a sharp confrontation between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, exacerbated by the US–South Korea joint military exercise Ulchi-Freedom Guardian in August 2017. Threats were exchanged, stoking fears about a possible war.

In 2018, the tensions de-escalated dramatically. The DPRK agreed to hold talks with South Korea, and the two established the Seoul-Pyongyang hotline. This diplomatic thaw was further reinforced by North Korea's participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, where high-level DPRK and South

Korean officials met. This set the stage for two unprecedented summits between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, first in Singapore and later in Hanoi. Despite initial optimism, the talks ultimately collapsed due to mutual misunderstanding and the emerging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia, which diverted diplomatic attention. While these crises have defined North Korea's nuclear trajectory, the DPRK remains a significant security challenge in the Indo-Pacific, with little indication that denuclearization is forthcoming.

existing alliances with Australia, Japan, South Korea, and others, (2) improving relationships with emerging powers including Indonesia and India, (3) forming a constructive relationship with China, (4) supporting Southeast Asian political multilateralism (which had been somewhat neglected under Bush), and (5) promoting economic multilateralization through initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP, see Campbell and Andrews 2013; Campbell 2016). Although some authors argue that these pillars symbolized a radical decoupling from prior US policy to Asia, they were, in reality, only minor adjustments to the existing strategy. Many of the alliances Obama reaffirmed had already been in place, and his predecessors had initiated dialogue with emerging powers, including China and India. Some of Obama's promises (such as the addition of 2,500 troops to Darwin, Australia) took much longer than expected and some were not fulfilled at all (allocating 60 percent of the US Navy fleet to the Asia-Pacific was only done by subtractions elsewhere, see Kolmaš and Kolmašová 2019).

The most visible departure from Bush's policies occurred in the areas of political and economic multilateralism, especially towards Southeast Asia. Obama was the first US president to visit all ten ASEAN leaders as a group in 2009 (six times in total—he visited the region twice more frequently than any of his predecessors). In 2009, Obama signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, paving the way for the United States to join the East Asian summit in 2011. Obama also established the first diplomatic mission and appointed the first Ambassador to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta in 2011. By 2015, Obama had elevated the relationship with ASEAN to a strategic partnership (The White House 2016). Similarly, Obama's plans for economic cooperation, encapsulated in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, had the pretense of tying the countries closer together (while limiting some negative trade externalities such as copyright infringements, etc.). Besides this political engagement with ASEAN, however, the expectations were sometimes not met with meaningful action. Obama's value-based diplomacy failed to connect with several Southeast Asian leaders with disputable human rights track records (such as the Philippines leader Rodrigo Duterte and Malaysia's Najib Razak), and the TPP was never ratified in the US, as President Trump withdrew from the agreement on his first day in office, citing no added benefits for the United States.

Obama's push to engage in ASEAN's summit diplomacy was perhaps among the most significant changes from his predecessor's policies. His relationship with India, meanwhile, evolved from initial tensions to closer cooperation. India was not among the countries visited by Hillary Clinton on her first trip to Asia, and the first years of the presidency saw a number of frictions between the two nations. Gradually, however, their relations improved. Obama hosted Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2009 in Washington, and became the first US president to be the chief guest of India's Republic Day celebrations of 2015. New Delhi and Washington improved on their bilateral dialogue by signing the "Delhi Declaration of Friendship," with a view to closer coordination of their relations as part of their Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Despite the fact that Trump's foreign policy discourse was markedly different from Obama's (he called the Pivot strategy a failure on many occasions, see Kolmaš and Kolmašová 2019), his first administration continued many of Obama's policies and even refined some aspects. Uninterested in value-based diplomacy, Trump paradoxically found common ground with leaders like Duterte and Najib, while his hard stance on China was welcomed by some Southeast Asian countries and Japan. That said, Trump was visibly unimpressed with Obama's push to multilateralize the East Asian order. He believed that the hub-and-spoke system is well-suited to pursue US interests in the region—giving Washington the biggest possible leverage in dealing with its allies and foes alike. Rather than re-confirming existing relationships, Trump sought to reconfigure them for the sake of American interests in Asia. The president on many occasions claimed that the alliances with the likes of Japan and South Korea have been hurting Washington, and that these allies need to do more to contribute to East Asian prosperity and security. Although Trump initially tried to create amicable ties with China, he eventually became one of the toughest US presidents on China, waging trade wars with Beijing and calling it the "threat of the century" (Reuters 2020).

The reactions of his South and Southeast Asian partners have been mixed. These countries have been alarmed by the growing influence and assertiveness of China, which drives them to rely on US security guarantees. But for ASEAN, it remains unclear how credible Washington's security guarantees vis-à-vis China are, wondering whether they can keep their "lowest common denominator" security policy (Emmerson 2013). ASEAN targets its role as the mediator of international politics in Asia, with the intention of keeping both China and the United States peacefully engaged in, preferably, a multilateral diplomatic format. Towards this aim, ASEAN has participated in a series of formats, including the RCEP, ASEAN+3, the EAS, and APEC. Neither the complete reliance on the United States, nor a submission to a new version of a Sino-centric system with China's dominant position seem like a viable and legitimate alternative for ASEAN. Concerns regarding the stability of the regional security order are exacerbated by the internal struggles within ASEAN, which threaten to split the organization along the pro/against Chinese lines. These dynamics will surely not lead to the end of the organization. But these

are testing times for ASEAN centrality, which remains crucial in navigating the escalating US–China tensions (Qiao-Franco, Karmazin, and Kolmaš 2024).

Following Trump's defeat in the 2020 election, many expected a return to the guidelines of Obama's pivot, given Biden's role as Obama's vice president and his appointment of Kurt Campbell, a key architect of the Pivot, as the National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific (also dubbed the Asia tzar). Despite the continued anti-China sentiment in the US administration, the Biden administration continued Obama's approach in some respects, including a push for economic multilateralism by launching a new economic bloc of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for Prosperity. Despite some differences among presidents, US policy toward Asia remained generally stable (until late 2024). Washington will certainly continue to monitor Indo-Pacific affairs closely, very likely maintaining a significant military presence in the region and relying on its hub-and-spoke alliance system. While Trump's second presidency signals notable shifts in the American approach to international politics, it is highly probable that the United States will persist in redirecting its primary strategic focus from Europe and the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific, started under Obama (if not earlier).

The Rise of China

China's rise has been perhaps the greatest security challenge for many Asian countries in the last several decades. Although Beijing takes pride in its long-term strategic thinking, and sees China's security rise as a form of "rejuvenation" into the position it once occupied in history—akin to a person who falls down and stands up again (Yan 2001)—there have been visible signs of China becoming more actively engaged in Indo-Pacific security and adopting an increasing forceful stance regarding its territorial interests. This assertive position has been particularly visible since around the Olympics in Beijing in 2008.

In the 1950s, China relied on the Sino-Soviet alliance. This alliance, however, was merely understood as a basic "insurance" against threats to the regime, yet with increasingly negative externalities. Mao Zedong was cautious about over-reliance on the Soviet Union, growing disillusioned with its lack of support during the Korean War and the two Taiwan Strait crises of 1954 and 1958. Over-reliance on one security partner also clashed with Beijing's century-long struggle for national independence and dignity. In the 1960s, Mao changed China's security focus inwards, into what Shambaugh (1992) called autarchy and militant nationalism on the one hand and an active forward defense policy on the other. Beijing virtually withdrew from the world (perhaps only outside of a half-hearted attempt to revive the Third World movement), looking to repair the damages caused by Mao's Great Leap Forward and the chaos of the ongoing Cultural Revolution. But external conflicts (such as the one in Vietnam and the 1969 border clash with the Soviets) and threats (such as the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) made Mao fear similar Soviet intrusion into Chinese affairs. These concerns drove Beijing to once

again seek security guarantees outside of its borders. The strategic reorientation towards the United States (into the "strategic triangle") granted China new guarantees vis-a-vis the Soviet threat and bought it time to proceed with its economic and political transformation. In the 1980s, China perceived the Soviet Union as its main security threat, but slowly detached itself from the reliance on the United States into a more equidistant position within the triangle while trying to build better relations with Japan and Western Europe (Shambaugh 1992).

The fall of the bipolar world and the de facto dismantling of the strategic triangle drove China to seek a new niche in regional and global affairs. Beijing's strategy in the 1990s rested on the primacy of economic means designed to ignite China's economic prowess, which would create the basis for its political and military rise. Wary of the drastic lessons brought by the Chinese seclusion from the world, Beijing saw the need to open up and create an image of a social, responsible, and peaceful actor. This image, in turn, would help China regain its once-lost power and status. On many occasions, China reiterated this pledge, regularly using phrases such as "China is committed to promoting peace and stability in this region" or "It follows the path of peaceful development and the mutually beneficial strategy of opening up, and pursues friendly cooperation with all countries" (PRC 2011). Throughout the decade, Chinese leaders introduced various concepts aiming to reconcile this aim with changes brought about by the fall of the Soviet Union, for example, "New Security Concept." Its core assumption was that the "Cold War mentality" needed to be forgotten, and that new forms of coordination needed to be found, based on "dialogue, consultation and negotiation" designed to generate a "fair and reasonable new international order." The 2002 version of this doctrine was presented to the Sixteenth Congress of the CCP. The essence of the New Security Concept was designated as cooperation on the basis of the UN Charter and the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence": achieving dispute resolution through peaceful means, strengthening international economic and financial organizations, emphasizing non-traditional security areas as well as more traditional security sectors, and conducting effective disarmament and arms control policy (PRC 2002; Tow and Rigby 2011, 65).

The New Security Concept guided most of China's security policy in the 1990s and early 2000s. Beijing refrained from using hard power to solve regional issues, and instead looked to promote its soft power status in creating a more multifaceted and comprehensive Asian security architecture based on regional consultations such as the Six Party Talks and the ASEAN+ format summits. It was able to keep a relatively low profile in foreign relations, shelving territorial disputes and accommodating neighbors. For instance, Beijing appeased the worried Southeast Asian countries by signing the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. After 9/11, with Washington becoming preoccupied in the Middle East, Chinese strategists sensed an opportunity to reinvigorate their regional status and political presence. In 2004, they followed the New Security Concept with the new concept of "peaceful rise" (later evolved into "peaceful development"), which aimed to

prioritize economic growth and political liberalization, while advancing the regional cultural and political role of China in the form of regional consultations and cooperation. This strategy, later encapsulated in the notion of "harmonious world," was well received, as it seemed to accept the US alliance system in Asia, but at the same time to promote multilateralism, which was so foreign to Chinese foreign policy in the past (cf. Zhao 2011).

This social visage of Chinese foreign policy, however, also possessed a realist strategic component behind it. Concerned about Japan's growing influence and its security alliance with the United States, Beijing's participation in institutions like ASEAN+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and boycott of Japanese regional initiatives (such as PM Yukio Hatoyama's East Asian Community and Shinzo Abe's FOIP) reflected these anxieties. Disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, claimed by both China and Japan, deepened tensions, particularly as the discovery of oil reserves in the 1970s made the islands a focal point of geopolitical rivalry (see Box 3.3; Pan 2007). These territorial disputes, along with the broader strategic rivalry between China and Japan, have continued to shape the Indo-Pacific order well into the third decade of the 21st century.

In the 2000s, China's focus shifted to countering American influence in the region. Although its peaceful rise and the New Security Concept promoted a low profile and social foreign policy, China grew increasingly concerned about the possible emergence of the United States as the hegemonic world power. Unable to match the United States militarily at that time, Beijing came up with a soft balancing strategy that made use of "international institutions, economic leverage and diplomatic maneuvering to frustrate American intentions" (Lieber and Alexander 2005, 125; Kolmaš 2016; Zhao 2011). This strategy—which consisted of cooperation with ASEAN, SCO, RCEP, and other "peripheral institutions," keeping good relations with Russia and other major powers, and stressing economic growth—continued to guide Chinese strategic policy in the 2000s. However, as Chinese economic prowess and military capabilities grew, so did its confidence in its role in regional security. Following the 2012–2013 Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis, which made US President Obama stress the security guarantees to Japan, Chinese leader Xi Jinping spoke on several occasions about the necessity of "leaving Asian affairs to Asians" (South China Morning Post 2014). Such statements expressed Xi Jinping's ambition to become a more proactive and influential player in regional security and depart from Deng Xiaoping's dictum of "keeping a low profile" (Callahan 2016).

The China-US rivalry has become a defining feature of the transformation of the regional security order in the Indo-Pacific. It became clear that the strategic visions of these two countries vary significantly. China has continued to develop its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, while simultaneously advocating adoption of the new Asian security concept in multiple institutional forums. Meanwhile, the United States, as stated above, has rested its strategy on encircling China by establishing a set of bilateral and minilateral alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security

BOX 3.3 THE SENKAKU/DIAOYU ISLANDS DISPUTE

The disputed island chain, known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and Diaoyutai in China, lies between the Ryukyu archipelago and Taiwan, approximately 170 kilometers away from each other. Although barren and uninhabitable, the islands hold strategic importance due to their proximity to key shipping lanes, rich fishing grounds, and likely substantial oil reserves underneath them. Aside from the 1945–1972 period, when they were under American administration as part of the Ryukyus, the islands have been under formal Japanese control since 1895. Japan's narrative asserts that the islands were discovered as *terra nullius* in that year and incorporated into the empire independently of the First Sino-Japanese War and the Treaty of Shimonoseki that concluded it. From China's perspective, however, the islands were discovered as early as the 15th century and were used for navigation and gathering herbs. Beijing claims that the islands were historically part of Formosa (Taiwan), which was to be returned to the PRC after World War II. Taiwan (the ROC) shares these claims, but argues that the islands should belong to the ROC, rather than mainland China.

The PRC has repeatedly questioned Japanese control over the islands, especially since the discovery of oil in the area during the 1970s, which escalated Chinese demands. In 2012, Japan's government under Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda nationalized these islands (i.e. bought them from a fisherman's family) in an attempt to prevent the Japanese nationalist Shintaro Ishihara from acquiring them and erecting a military base there. Despite Noda's efforts to ease tensions with China, the nationalization triggered large-scale protests in China, marking one of the most significant crises in Sino-Japanese relations since World War II. Although the crisis was eventually diffused, the PRC continues to press for the islands' return.

In 2013, Beijing further asserted its territorial claim by establishing the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone over the area, requiring aircraft flying over the Senkaku to file flight plans to Chinese authorities. In the late 2010s and the 2020s, Chinese vessels (both commercial and military) have repeatedly entered Japanese territorial waters around the islands, escalating tensions. The United States, under President Obama, guaranteed Japan that the islands fall within the scope of its security umbrella, a commitment reaffirmed by President Joe Biden. From the Chinese perspective, this security guarantee reinforces Japan's control over disputed territories, fueling China's resolve to assert its sovereignty claims over the islands more vigorously.

Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia–UK–US trilateral security pact (AUKUS) announced in September 2021, trying to sustain US influence in an emerging center of Great Power rivalry through "preparedness, partnerships, and promoting a networked region" (US Department of Defense 2019; also Liu 2020). Worried about the impact of US presence in China's red-line zones (including Taiwan and the East and South China Seas), Beijing has acquired stronger military capabilities such as a blue-water navy and power-projection assets, and has carried out large-scale island reef construction and land reclamation projects throughout the South China Sea. In 2017, Xi Jinping stated that China has "achieved a tremendous transformation: it has stood up, grown rich, and is becoming strong" (Liu 2020; Xi 2017). Indeed, China is moving towards the national rejuvenation it has long pursued. It is becoming crystal clear that the future shape of regional security order will rest on the way the United States and its allies adjust to this inevitable reality.

The Emergence of Other Regional Centers

The rise of China and the American pivot to Asia have not been the only power dynamics happening in the Indo-Pacific. Several other major players in the region have tried to permeate their image of the ideal Indo-Pacific security order, including Japan, India, and, to a lesser extent, Australia and ASEAN.

Japan has perhaps been the most visible of these players. Under the late (2022) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan made great strides in shaping the region. Even before his second tenure as prime minister (following his first, short stint in 2006–2007), Japan has been on its way to incremental changes to its security posture. Although muted for most parts of the Cold War, after the end of the Soviet Union, Japan moved to "normalize" its foreign and security policy. After being criticized for not taking part in the Gulf War (despite large financial contributions), Tokyo adopted in 1992 a new law specifying the deployment of its peacekeeping troops in UN operations. The "PKO law" allowed for Japanese soldiers to be sent abroad for the first time since World War II. This paved the way for Japanese soldiers to take part in several UN operations including the UNCTAD in Cambodia 1992, the first mission where Chinese soldiers were present too. The law, consistent with Japan's pacifist constitution (especially Article 9), imposed several restrictions on the military, such as prohibiting direct combat.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2011, Japan further enhanced its security capabilities. The Junichiro Koizumi administration, in an attempt to fulfil its good partner role to the US, passed the Humanitarian Relief and Iraqi Reconstruction Special Measures Law in 2003. Despite stern Diet and public opposition, the law allowed Japanese soldiers to be sent to Iraq in their first overseas deployment outside of the UN operating mandate. When Abe returned to power in 2012, he accelerated Japan's security evolution, enacting several institutional reforms such as setting up the National Security Council and transforming the Defense Agency into a fully fledged ministry. Abe also initiated a set of legal changes

expanding the capabilities of SDFs. The most notable of these was the new security legislature of 2014–2015 that allowed for collective self-defense in areas not necessarily surrounding Japan but also of Japanese national interest (such as the Malacca Strait or around oil shipping lanes). In late 2022, Abe's successor Fumio Kishida, announced new security laws that further increase the Japanese Self Defense Forces and raised the defense budget to 2 percent of the GDP by 2027. This has led many analysts to believe that Japanese pacifism is officially dead (Gustafsson, Hagström, and Hanssen 2018; see also Kolmaš 2019; 2020) and that Japan is now indistinguishable from any other major military power.

There is no doubt that China ranks high among Japan's security challenges in the region. It has frequently topped Japan's threat section of its Diplomatic Bluebook and—especially under Abe—Tokyo has devoted much of its foreign policy vigor to combating China's growing influence in Asia. Abe played a crucial role in promoting the concept of the Indo-Pacific, first introducing it in 2006 in his "Confluence of the two seas" speech, which called for greater cooperation between East, South, and Southeast Asia, promoting freedom of navigation and safe passage. The term Indo-Pacific has since gained widespread adoption, especially by the United States and the European Union in their respective Asian security strategies. India, seen as a peer to China in terms of population and potential, became a key element in Abe's vision for a FOIP. Abe sought to lock India into alliances aimed at reducing Chinese influence, including the Quad, a strategic grouping of Japan, the United States, India, and Australia. While the Quad has faced setbacks—such as Australia's temporary departure under Kevin Rudd—it has strengthened over time and continues to promote a "rules-based maritime order" to counter China's maritime claims (The White House 2021). Although originally a four-member minilateral grouping, it has been evolving into a Quad+ format, which now includes South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam, prompting China to label it as "Asian NATO." Despite changes in leadership and shifts in Japan's foreign policy focus following the COVID-19 pandemic, Abe's legacy of alliance building, proactive diplomacy, a close relationship with the United States, and the application of counterpressure to Chinese interests in Asia remain influential.

ASEAN has also emerged as one of the hubs of Indo-Pacific diplomacy over the last three decades. While initially serving mainly as a forum for regional consultations with little institutional power, since the 1990s, ASEAN has become a more active player in regional security. Its common security agenda has long been quite weak. Member countries have been interlocked into the two spheres of influence, relying on their security on bilateral alliances with either the United States (as in the case of the Philippines and Thailand) or the Soviet Union (as in the case of Vietnam and Laos). In response to the superpowers surrounding them, ASEAN countries have consistently advocated for non-interference in their domestic affairs, and thus, there is only a limited role of foreign actors (including institutions) in their domestic security. Amitav Acharya has argued (Acharya 2001; 2004) that this non-interference—together with other social norms including the preference

for consensus, consultations, mediations, and others—have formed the basis of ASEAN's developing security community. In practice, this has been manifested in a variety of ways. Acharya stipulated four components of the practical non-interference strategy of ASEAN: (1) Refraining from criticizing the actions of the governments of member states towards its own people; (2) Directing criticism at the actions of states that are perceived to constitute a breach of the principle of non-intervention; (3) Denying recognition, sanctuary, or other forms of support to any rebel group seeking to destabilize or overthrow the government of a neighboring state; and (4) Providing political support and material assistance to member states in their actions against subversive activities (Acharya 2001, 58). Indeed, these four points have been clearly visible in ASEAN's approach to security, especially in the Cold War years. For instance, during the Cambodian crisis years in the late 1970s, ASEAN members continued to support Pol Pot's regime in the United Nations General Assembly, despite clear evidence of its domestic brutality. ASEAN has also been very defensive of any foreign criticism including frequent voices about the member states' human rights record.

Since the 1990s, however, the reliance on bilateral security guarantees and a limited mode of regional security cooperation based on shared social norms has transformed into a more open and multilateral means of security promotion and confidence building. ASEAN's summit diplomacy has widened into the "+" version, encompassing ASEAN+1 (China) and ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, South Korea). It has also promoted the establishment of other regional fora including the APEC, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and, in the security domain, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Although still rooted in ASEAN's consultative means of security achievement (providing more non-traditional security functions, including piracy prevention, capacity building, and disaster relief), the ARF has been among the first attempts to multilateralize security dialogue in the wider region. ASEAN has further widened its institutional structure with the 2003 Bali Concord II, officially adopting political-security cooperation among its three major aims (the so-called ASEAN Communities, see Chapter 5). This multilateral offensive had led some to argue—in line with Acharya's (2004) security community argument—that ASEAN has become a regional powerhouse contributing to the security and political constitution of East and Southeast Asia (Collins 2007). There are others, however, who claim that ASEAN's security role is somewhat overexaggerated. Pointing to ASEAN's remaining narrow interpretation of self-interest and the complexity of their geopolitical and geoeconomic interests (including the increasingly heated South China Sea dispute, see Box 3.4), resulting in a lack of unity in the organization and its weak institutional foundations (see for instance Hutt 2021; Putra, Darwis and Burhanuddin 2019; Khoo 2004), they have argued that ASEAN's political-security community has not reached its stated potential, and that ASEAN remains similarly limited in its foreign policy sphere too. Despite these criticisms, ASEAN remains an influential international organization that along with other regional major power hubs, continues to shape Indo-Pacific security.

BOX 3.4 ISLAND DISPUTES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea have long been a source of tension and competition, involving conflicting claims over key islands and maritime zones, crucial shipping lanes, rich deposits of crude oil and natural gas, and abundant fishing grounds. The region sees one-third of global trade pass through its waters, making it of immense strategic and economic importance. Several countries in East and Southeast Asia, including the PRC, Taiwan, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, have overlapping territorial claims. The PRC claims most of the territory based on its "Nine dash line," a demarcation that Beijing claims has historical support for its sovereignty over the region. The most disputed territories include the Paracel and the Spratly Islands, which were assigned to South Vietnam following the Geneva Accords that ended the First Indochina War in 1954. Other disputed areas include the Scarborough Shoal, the waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, and the maritime zones around Indonesia's Natuna Islands. These claims often center on access to natural resources, including hydrocarbons and fisheries, and the strategic importance of securing maritime routes that are vital for regional and global trade and security.

For much of the region's post-war history, the competing claims did not pose a significant threat to the regional order. Tensions, however, have occasionally escalated into open conflict. In 1974, the PRC seized control of the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam, citing the need to prevent North Vietnam from gaining control. In 1988, the PRC and Vietnam briefly clashed over the Johnson Reef and in 1994, the PRC occupied the Mischief Reef. In the 1990s through the 2000s, the PRC's official position was to shelve these disputes for future generations and build amicable relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors. The status quo, however, began to shift in the 2010s, as China adopted a more forceful approach that led to a confrontation with the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal in 2012. During this time, the PRC also commenced the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and placed military equipment on them under the rationale of enhancing maritime security, preventing piracy, and safeguarding vital sea lanes for trade.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve these disputes have been ongoing. In 2002, China and ASEAN countries signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea—a non-binding agreement aimed at "consolidat[ing] mutual trust and good neighbourliness." Though a mere goodwill gesture at first, in 2011, the signatories agreed to a set of guidelines for its implementation. These efforts were aimed at establishing a Code of Conduct (COC), a more comprehensive framework designed to manage tensions and prevent conflict. However, as of 2024, the COC has yet to be finalized, with discussions continuing amid rising geopolitical pressures and conflicting interests in the region.

Conclusion

Nearly 30 years have passed since Friedberg predicted a grim and conflict-prone future for Asia. Have these predictions materialized? Has Asia become a cauldron of rivalry, security dilemmas, and conflict? And if not now, are we likely to see these in the future? The answer is, as always, complex. It is perhaps safe to say that the Indo-Pacific has neither descended into large-scale war nor achieved complete peace. Instead, the evolution of the regional security order has been incremental, shaped by intensifying geopolitical competition and strategic realignments. Some of the dynamics anticipated in the early 1990s have indeed emerged. The Japan-China rivalry has deepened as Beijing's economic and military power has grown, while the most significant systemic factor in the region—the US–China competition—has intensified. Washington-Beijing relations certainly deteriorated throughout the 2010s, and even after Trump unwillingly left the White House in 2020, the new administration continued the anti-China rhetoric and political action, and this trend is likely to stay. But it would be misleading to say that the region has reached a crisis point. The status quo—characterized by China's expanding regional presence counterbalanced by the US-led hub-and-spoke alliance system—remains intact. The American security architecture, reinforced by minilateral groupings like the Quad and AUKUS, aims to contain China's influence, with India playing an increasingly crucial role in this balancing act. Japan, too, has positioned itself as a key player, promoting a FOIP while countering China's Belt and Road Initiative with alternative economic and infrastructure projects. Australia, India, and even some European powers such as the United Kingdom and France have reinforced alliances aimed at constraining China's regional dominance. Meanwhile, ASEAN continues to offer an alternative in the soft and mediating security paradigm, yet faced with expanding minilateralism in the region that might make it increasingly irrelevant.

It is inevitable, however, that China's rise will continue and the Asian equilibrium will gradually shift towards it. In many ways, the 2020s and 2030s will be defining periods for the Indo-Pacific's security architecture. If a large-scale conflict—such as those forewarned by Friedberg and others—is to be avoided, the United States and China must establish a framework for managing their rivalry. This requires recognizing each other's core interests, delineating clear red lines, and preventing escalation through miscalculation. Other regional actors, including most notably India, ASEAN, Australia, Japan, and perhaps even Russia, will surely play their part in the looming reorganization of Indo-Pacific security, but arguably it will be the relationship between the two superpowers that will define it. Special focus will continue to lie in several key security challenges to the Indo-Pacific: (1) Unresolved territorial disputes including the ones in South Asia (Kashmir), the South China Sea (the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands), the East China Sea (Senkaku/Diaoyu) and Northeast Asia (Dokdo/Takeshima and Kurile/Northern Territories); (2) the China-Taiwan relationship; (3) the North

Korean nuclear conundrum; and (4) non-conventional security threats including terrorism, worsening climate situation and the resulting trends of migration, land degradation and the increase of catastrophes, and social issues including population decline.

Regarding the first, some of these conflicts remain frozen and are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future (the Kurils, Dokdo, Paracels), despite continued efforts to alter them. Others, however, carry greater risk of escalation. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands remain under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella, but questions persist about the credibility of Washington's security commitments, especially since Donald Trump returned to the American Presidency in 2025. Japan remains deeply concerned about increasing Chinese incursions near the islands, including the presence of military vessels and the establishment of overlapping Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ). The South China Sea dispute could pose more intricate challenges. ASEAN countries remain divided over their approach to China. While some countries (such as Cambodia and Laos) align closely with Beijing, others (notably Vietnam and the Philippines) have pushed back against China's maritime claims. China, seeing the South China Sea as critical to its future energy security, prefers bilateral negotiations over multilateral dispute resolution. The ongoing negotiations for a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea offer a potential diplomatic solution, but key disagreements—such as the legal status of the agreement and the role of third-party actors—continue to delay its finalization (Strangio 2022).

The cross-strait dynamic between China and Taiwan has undergone significant shifts in recent years. One of the most critical developments has been the generational transformation of Taiwan's political identity. Younger Taiwanese, with little to no personal connection to the mainland, have increasingly rejected the "One China" framework of the 1992 Consensus. The victory of pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party candidate William Lai in the 2024 elections underscores this trend. While Taiwan's government has remained cautious about formally declaring independence, dissatisfaction with the status quo is growing. The United States and the European Union have demonstrated greater support for Taiwan, with high-profile political visits—much to the ire of Beijing, who responded with large military exercises around the island. That said, the war in Ukraine has provided China with a cautionary example. Beijing has witnessed the severe economic and diplomatic isolation imposed on Russia and is wary of triggering similar Western sanctions. Given China's deep integration into global trade—particularly with the United States and the EU—this could serve as a deterrent against a full-scale invasion of Taiwan, at least in the near future.

Regarding North Korea, it now (as of 2025) seems light years away from the pre-COVID years, in which the leaders of DPRK and the United States attempted a breakthrough (very much facilitated by the skillful diplomacy of the South Korean President Moon Jae-in) in its frozen bilateral relationship. The COVID-19

pandemic, together with visible differences in the aims and perceptions of both of the parties, effectively dismantled all the gains that were achieved in the talks, and the US-DPRK relationship returned to the previous levels of distrust and heated discourse. Pyongyang appears determined to solidify its status as a nuclear power, while Washington refuses to recognize it as such. This deadlock suggests that the current status quo—periodic missile tests, economic sanctions, and diplomatic stalemates—will continue to define US–North Korean relations for the foreseeable future.

Lastly, there is a plethora of non-conventional threats to Indo-Pacific security that range from climate change, demographic challenges, migration, displacement, terrorism, and separatism to maritime security threats. These issues, some of which will be discussed in greater detail in other chapters of this book, have the potential to contribute to both the internal and external insecurity of the Indo-Pacific countries. Especially, climate change and the rising oceans will threaten many of the low-lying territories and countries with low levels of GDP and great vulnerabilities such as Bangladesh. The international community needs to address these issues more vigorously, than it has been in the past. Without proactive measures, worsening climate conditions and economic pressures could drive mass migration, destabilizing both the Indo-Pacific and regions beyond.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What were the key transformations in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region during the colonial period?
- How did World War II and the subsequent Cold War reshape strategic alliances and security structures in the Indo-Pacific?
- Compare and contrast realist, liberal, and constructivist interpretations of the Indo-Pacific regional order.
- How has the rise of China influenced traditional security dynamics within the Indo-Pacific?
- Why is the South China Sea considered a major flashpoint in regional security, and what are the implications for international law?
- What role does ASEAN play in mediating security tensions in the Indo-Pacific, and what are its structural limitations?
- In what ways have non-traditional security issues (e.g. climate change, pandemics) begun to influence the Indo-Pacific security agenda?
- To what extent can the Indo-Pacific be regarded as a coherent security region rather than a contested geopolitical construct?

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