



## **1. Introduction: The United States and China relationship in the Indo-Pacific, a theoretical approach to international relations**

The growing competition between the United States and China cannot be understood without analyzing the central role both play in the Indo-Pacific, a region that has become the epicenter of contemporary international politics and that defines the global order of power and influence. For the world's major powers, maintaining a presence in and exercising control over this region is of vital interest. Likewise, the exclusion of rival powers from one's sphere of influence and the disruption of their alliance networks constitute indisputable objectives. Consequently, China seeks to establish itself as the regional leader and to contain the United States within this key area of interest, while the United States undertakes actions to consolidate its presence in the Indo-Pacific. This article aims to examine the interaction models of both countries to determine whether their strategies respond to minilateral or multilateral approaches. Minilateralism is characterized by the creation of small, flexible, and goal-oriented alliances that enable the coordination of actions without the need for large and complex institutional frameworks, as exemplified by the United States through the QUAD and AUKUS. By contrast, multilateralism has traditionally implied broad, stable, and cooperative structures that seek to manage shared interests through common rules, of which the relationship between China and ASEAN serves as a clear example.

Assessing whether the United States and China operate under a minilateral, or multilateral logic is essential to understanding how both powers project power and influence, manage alliances, and shape the region's strategic balance. Moreover, analyzing this evolution through key theories and concepts of International Relations will be particularly useful in identifying whether the behavior of these two actors corresponds to previously established patterns or whether we are witnessing the beginning of a reconfiguration of the international system that the world will experience in the near future.

International Relations is a heterogeneous discipline in terms of its worldview. It offers different lenses through which reality is examined, developing perspectives and interpretations of how the world functions. Although there is a wide range of experts and approaches, three major theoretical paradigms allow for an understanding of international

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dynamics: Realism<sup>1</sup>, Liberalism<sup>2</sup>, and Constructivism<sup>3</sup>. First, Liberalism proves too idealistic to examine the relationship between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific in today's pragmatic world. This theory underestimates the ambitions for influence and power pursued by regional powers and overlooks the possibility of armed conflict due to the existence of international organizations and norms. This does not align with the post-Ukraine War world, in which compliance with so-called "international regimes"<sup>4</sup> has been relegated to a secondary position behind national interest, as President Trump has demonstrated on multiple occasions<sup>5</sup>. Second, Constructivism does not constitute the most suitable analytical perspective in this case, as it is limited to a theoretical examination of international concepts and lacks the tools necessary to predict the spiral of competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, Realism in International Relations emerges as the most appropriate theory for understanding U.S. and Chinese behavior in the region, as it aligns with the pragmatism of contemporary politics, devoid of moral or ethical considerations and guided by national

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<sup>1</sup> Realism in International Relations grounds its theoretical perspective in a fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature, which holds that both individuals and states are inherently prone to conflict. Consequently, states will always pursue the ultimate goal of maximizing their power and influence, as this ensures their survival within an anarchic international system that lacks a global governing authority with full sovereignty. Furthermore, actors in the international system (namely states) are considered rational and prioritize the protection of their national interests at all costs, implementing any necessary measures or actions to achieve these ends. From a realist standpoint, power is not only an end in itself but also an essential tool for survival in an environment of constant competition. For further information, see LEBOW, Richard N., "Classical realism", in DUNNE, Tim; KURKI, Milja; and SMITH, Steve (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, pp. 59-77.

<sup>2</sup> Liberalism in International Relations is based on the emphasis of cooperation between states through international institutions and norms. According to this theoretical perspective, the main dynamics of global actors are grounded in economic interdependence, which promotes peace and collaboration. It also considers non-state actors (such as international organizations, corporations, multinational companies, or individuals) as key players shaping the state of the international system. The two main hypotheses of this theory are the "democratic peace" thesis, which asserts that democratic states are less likely to engage in armed conflict, and the idea that the existence of institutions reduces system-wide anarchy by promoting rules and international norms. For further information, see RUSSETT, Bruce, "Liberalism", in DUNNE, Tim; KURKI, Milja; and SMITH, Steve (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, pp. 94-113.

<sup>3</sup> Constructivism in International Relations asserts that international relations are social constructions and, as such, depend on the ideas, norms, and meanings shared among actors and individuals. This theoretical perspective also incorporates non-state actors (such as institutions or social movements) to explain dynamics at the international level. Consequently, Constructivism focuses on understanding reality as a social construct that develops shared norms and meanings, which can change and evolve over time, thereby transforming state behavior. For further information, see FIERKE, K. M., "Constructivism", in DUNNE, Tim; KURKI, Milja; and SMITH, Steve (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, pp. 187-204.

<sup>4</sup> An International Regime in International Relations refers to a set of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures that guide actors (especially states) in specific areas of international relations.

<sup>5</sup> Since the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency, the United States withdrew from several agreements, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Iran Nuclear Deal, and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It also disregarded international initiatives for cooperation in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. These actions exemplify the shift in U.S. behavior at the international level, prioritizing national interest over international cooperation. For further reference, see DONG, W., *A Comparative Study of Unilateralism and Multilateralism in the Trump Administration Period*, China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, 2020.

interest. This translates into strategies aimed at maximizing influence -particularly in the military, economic, and diplomatic domains- given that resources are limited within an anarchic international system, generating inherent distrust among states that may lead to conflict. Thus, for state entities, national interest prevails over all other motivations for behavior, shaping international politics as a constant struggle for power and influence, in which states ultimately can rely only on themselves, in accordance with the well-known “self-help principle”<sup>6</sup>. Accordingly, Realism will serve as the theoretical framework through which the relationship between China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific is analyzed in this article.

However, Classical Realism also presents certain limitations when establishing an analytical framework, as it focuses on state action as that of rational actors while overlooking the international power structures that may influence state behavior. As a result, Neorealism, or Structural Realism<sup>7</sup>, emerges with its two main variants, which allow for a more detailed examination of the situation of the United States and China: Defensive Neorealism<sup>8</sup>, which advocates a balance-of-power equilibrium, and Offensive Neorealism<sup>9</sup>, which defends the pursuit of power maximization by states.

Continuing within the realist theoretical perspective, survival in an anarchic international system may give rise to a “security dilemma”, a situation in which the “defensive” actions of one state are perceived as threats by another, triggering a cyclical arms race between them that may ultimately lead to direct conflict. China’s rise in a world previously guided

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<sup>6</sup> The Principle of Self-Help is a central concept in Realism, stating that states must ensure their own security within an anarchic international system, where no sovereign authority exists to defend or protect them.

<sup>7</sup> Neorealism, or Structural Realism, in International Relations is a theoretical advancement developed by Kenneth Waltz in the 1970s to address the analytical limitations of Classical Realism. It posits that the ‘structure’ of the international system is the primary motivation and determinant of state behavior, influencing their actions and political strategies, particularly in areas of power, security, and defense. The system can take different forms, such as unipolarity (with a single hegemonic power), bipolarity (with two major power blocs), and multipolarity (with three or more great powers). Unlike Classical Realism, Neorealism does not attribute the propensity for conflict to a pessimistic view of human nature, but rather to states’ desire to ensure their security in an anarchic competitive environment. As a result, alliances or balancing measures may emerge within the system to defend against rising powers, potentially generating a security dilemma among system actors. For further reference, see MEARSHEIMER, J. J. (2013), “Structural Realism”, in T. Dunne, M. Kurki, & S. Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, pp. 77–93, Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Defensive Neorealism, advocated by Waltz, posits that states generally seek a balance of power to prevent potential hostile alliances from threatening them. Consequently, states tend to act cautiously in their pursuit of power and influence expansion. For further reference, see MEARSHEIMER, J. J. (2013), “Structural Realism”, in T. Dunne, M. Kurki, & S. Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, pp. 77–93, Oxford University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Offensive Neorealism, represented by Mearsheimer, argues that states primarily seek to maximize their power and influence to prevent potential threats. Additionally, they are willing to take strategic risks to ensure a dominant position within the international system. For further reference, see MEARSHEIMER, J. J. (2013), “Structural Realism”, in T. Dunne, M. Kurki, & S. Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, pp. 77–93, Oxford University Press.

by the United States as the hegemonic power constitutes a clear example of a potential security dilemma. Therefore, according to Offensive Neorealists, the rising power - China in this case - would have as its ultimate objective the establishment of its hegemony within its sphere of influence as a guarantee of survival. However, this claim does not enjoy unanimous consensus within Structural Realism, as Defensive perspectives tend to favor the idea of a peaceful Chinese rise without the pursuit of hegemony, within a context of constant competition through alliances that expand its sphere of influence. Nevertheless, there is one point on which neorealist scholars broadly agree: “the structure of the international system forces great powers to compete among themselves for power” (p. 90)<sup>10</sup>.

Competition between China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific also aligns with the realist concept of the “Thucydides Trap”<sup>11</sup>, as China’s rise as an emerging power may pose a threat to U.S. hegemony. According to this concept, although various authors argue that direct conflict can be avoided, the tendency toward rivalry between the United States and China was a virtually inevitable scenario. This is especially evident following the end of post-Cold War U.S. hegemony, in which Soviet influence has been replaced by China, which has far exceeded all expectations of economic growth<sup>12</sup>, thereby creating two axes of influence within the international structure. This dynamic has prompted the United States to seek to consolidate multilateral strategic alliances such as AUKUS or the QUAD, of which India is a member and the only country in the region capable of counterbalancing Chinese influence and hegemony<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. The United States in the Indo-Pacific

In recent years, the United States has demonstrated a central interest in the Indo-Pacific, even going so far as to define itself as an “Indo-Pacific power” in 2022 under the Biden

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<sup>10</sup> MEARSHEIMER, J. J. (2013). *Structural realism*. In T. Dunne, M. Kurki, & S. Smith (Eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (pp. 77–93). Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> The Thucydides Trap, popularized by the American political scientist Graham Allison, originates from a study of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. It describes how the rise of Athens posed a threat to Sparta’s hegemony, creating a dynamic of fear and distrust that can lead to conflict. For further reference, see LEBOW, R. N. (2013), “Classical Realism”, in T. Dunne, M. Kurki, & S. Smith (Eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (3rd ed., pp. 59–77), Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> DESCH, M. C. “Balancing Away from War: How the USA and China Can Side-step the Thucydides’ Trap”. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2025, pp. 151–172.

<sup>13</sup> FERNÁNDEZ APARICIO, J. *Will History Repeat Itself? India Today, Like China Yesterday, and the Risk of a New Thucydides Trap* (IEEE Analysis Document, 44/2025). Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2025.

administration. As surprising as this may seem, given its limited geographical presence in the region, it is essential to recall the scale of its diplomatic and military footprint. In fact, the United States currently maintains 11 defense and security treaties in the region and has woven a network of bilateral alliances with strategically positioned states such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. Through these relationships, it has established defense arrangements such as the QUAD and AUKUS, among others, which constitute the primary means through which U.S. power is projected in the Pacific.

The U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific is not new; rather, it has undergone significant evolution over the past decade. The country began to demonstrate its interest in the region as a key geostrategic area of foreign policy under President Obama, who announced the “Pivot to Asia” as early as 2011. This shift in U.S. strategic focus became even more pronounced under the presidency of Donald Trump, who in 2017 unveiled the “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, explicitly defining China as the principal threat and thereby marking a clear rivalry between the two countries. In 2018, Vice President Pence accused Beijing of trade manipulation, militarization of the South China Sea, and interference in U.S. domestic politics, clearly signaling the rupture of any prospect of a “friendly” bilateral relationship. In response, President Biden published a “New Indo-Pacific Strategy” in 2022, which emphasized that the United States would only be able to protect and defend its vital interests through a sustained presence in the Indo-Pacific and the strengthening of its alliances with other regional states. While this document was not overtly confrontational, it nonetheless conveyed the perceived need to contain China’s attempts at global power projection, while also calling on Beijing to cooperate in certain areas such as climate change, nuclear non-proliferation, and global health<sup>14</sup>.

From 2022 onward, the United States deployed a broad range of economic, military, and diplomatic initiatives. These included the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) as an alternative to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), aimed at fostering more resilient trade, as well as the promotion of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). In the military domain, the United States advanced the Pacific

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<sup>14</sup> SPANISH INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (IEEE). *Strategic Outlook 2025*. Higher Centre for National Defence Studies (CESEDEN), Madrid, 2025. Accessed on 16 November 2025 at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/panorama-estrat%C3%A9gico-2025>

Deterrence Initiative and the Maritime Security Initiative, intensified its naval presence in the South China Sea, and strengthened the defense capabilities of Japan and the Philippines, alongside reinforcing alliances through AUKUS. Other significant diplomatic actions include the organization of a special summit with ASEAN in 2023, after which the United States elevated its relations with Vietnam and Indonesia to the level of strategic partnerships. The QUAD<sup>15</sup> is also particularly relevant; although it is not a formal military alliance, it often functions as a forum for dialogue and cooperation to address regional challenges, at times acting as a counterbalance to China's growing role in the Indo-Pacific. Notably, the QUAD launched the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) with the aim of countering China's expanding influence and presence in the region. It is also worth highlighting that at the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO set a precedent for coordination with Asian partners by inviting leaders from Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand, stating that its objective was to "address the systemic challenges posed by the Chinese Communist Party to Euro-Atlantic security"<sup>16</sup>.

The second presidency of Donald Trump marked a turning point in relations between Southeast Asian countries and the United States. Prior to the announcement of tariffs on April 2, 2025, countries in the region did not express major concern regarding the change in presidency. However, these states are heavily dependent on manufacturing exports and regional supply chains -particularly Vietnam and Malaysia- and thus face potential disruptions to financial market stability, consumption and investment levels, and overall economic growth. Even when bilateral agreements are considered, such as the one signed between the United States and Vietnam in July 2025, the profitability of global supply chains would be undermined. As a result, these countries were forced to choose between two options: seeking bilateral agreements with the Trump administration or diversifying their trade partners -most notably China- to reduce their dependence on the United States. Subsequently, Xi Jinping presented China as a defender of free trade during his tour of Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia in April 2025, seeking to fill the gap

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<sup>15</sup> The QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) is a mechanism of strategic cooperation between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Its primary objective is to promote a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific through coordination on issues such as maritime security, technology, supply chains, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response.

<sup>16</sup> SPANISH INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (IEEE). *Strategic Outlook 2025*. Higher Centre for National Defence Studies (CESEDEN), Madrid, 2025. Accessed on 16 November 2025 at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/panorama-estrat%C3%A9gico-2025>

left by the United States, which was increasingly perceived as an unstable and protectionist partner<sup>17</sup>.

Regarding Malaysia, the agreement signed by Donald Trump in October 2025 represents one of the clearest expressions of the bilateral strategy pursued by the United States to expand its sphere of influence in the region. This agreement grants the United States greater access to Malaysia's rare earths and critical minerals without the imposition of export quotas, while also considering the possibility of granting licenses to U.S. companies for the development of the local sector. It is important to note that these minerals are essential for military, medical, and defense applications, and that access to them allows the United States to reduce its dependence on Chinese supplies. China had effectively maintained a near monopoly over this industry and had used these resources as a strategic tool in its trade war with the United States<sup>18</sup>.

As outlined above, Washington clearly perceives China as the principal threat to its "hegemony" within the international system. This perception is reinforced by an examination of what appears to be China's primary objective: the containment of the United States in the Indo-Pacific and the fragmentation of its alliance network. Accordingly, U.S. actions reveal an attempt to consolidate an Indo-Pacific space free from Chinese influence. However, these objective faces both internal and external challenges. The Trump presidency has clearly embraced a protectionist orientation<sup>19</sup> -as reflected in the widely promoted and acclaimed slogan "America First"- and has presided over a society that is deeply polarized with regard to foreign policy. This dynamic clashes with the multilateral U.S. approach that characterized much of the twentieth century and complicates the establishment of solid and durable alliances with other countries. Moreover, competition with China is a particularly complex concept in a globalized world, as interdependence constrains states from pursuing major strategic advances or engaging in open confrontation for fear of triggering an economic crisis. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that competition between the two countries is more present than ever.

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<sup>17</sup> LOWY INSTITUTE. "Trump Tariffs Drive Southeast Asia Towards China". *East Asia Forum*, 2 July 2025. Accessed on 29 September 2025 at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/trump-tariffs-drive-southeast-asia-towards-china>

<sup>18</sup> EFE. "Trump Signs an Agreement Expanding U.S. Access to Malaysia's Rare Earths". *La Vanguardia*, 2 October 2025. Accessed on 2 November 2025 at <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20251026/11198044/trump-firma-acuerdo-amplia-acceso-ee-uu-tierras-raras-malasia-agenciaslv20251026.html>

<sup>19</sup> LOWY INSTITUTE. "Trump's *America First* Risks Ceding More Ground to China in the Pacific". *Nikkei Asia*, 24 December 2024. Consulted on 16 November 2025 at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/trump-s-america-first-risks-ceding-more-ground-china-pacific>

## 2.1. AUKUS

Understanding the position of the United States in the Indo-Pacific is impossible without analyzing its technical-military agreement, AUKUS, with the United Kingdom and Australia. The creation of this pact represents a geostrategic turning point that reflects a shift toward a new international order centered on the Indo-Pacific. Signed in 2021, AUKUS institutionalizes the sharing of sensitive information on naval nuclear propulsion with the aim of providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and strengthening technological and security cooperation among the three countries. It emerged as a response to Chinese expansionism in the region. This agreement is particularly significant given the specific hydrographic conditions of the South China Sea -such as irregular seabeds- which, in the event of an open conflict, would complicate military maneuvers; therefore, the sharing of naval information and technology is crucial if the objective is to contain tensions and prevent war. However, it is necessary to highlight that the creation of AUKUS generated tensions with France and NATO, as the agreement was signed in secrecy and directly affected the French defense industry by causing the loss of a multibillion-dollar submarine contract with Australia. For NATO, this crisis revealed a fracture of trust among allies, as a member state such as the United States and a key partner like the United Kingdom concluded a military agreement without coordinating with another fundamental member such as France<sup>20</sup>. This episode illustrates not only how the United States is gradually altering the way it engages and behaves with its allies, but also how clearly the Indo-Pacific has become the central focus of its foreign policy.

## 2.2. A Comparison between AUKUS and NATO

The mere existence of a U.S.-driven military agreement inevitably recalls the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), founded in 1949 as a collective defense pact explicitly designed to preserve regional security through commitments to mutual defense, political coordination, and the development of joint military capabilities. It is worth noting that, although NATO is legally designed for the Euro-Atlantic space, political debates and proposals have emerged around the idea of a hypothetical “global NATO”, which would

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<sup>20</sup> FERNÁNDEZ DIZ, Aurelio. “Importance and Strategic Significance of the AUKUS Agreement”. *Cuadernos de Pensamiento Naval*, no. 32, 2022, pp. 53–65. Naval War College – Spanish Navy. Ministry of Defence, Madrid.

broaden its focus toward regions such as the Indo-Pacific, involving partners like Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand, countries with which NATO has progressively strengthened its ties over time. However, beyond this debate, no concrete steps have been taken to turn this initiative into reality, largely because the collective defense guarantee has complicated its implementation<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, the path chosen by the United States and NATO has been the development of “Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes” (ITPP)<sup>22</sup>, which are based on bilateral, interest-driven frameworks that define objectives and areas of cooperation according to what each partner is willing and able to contribute to the Alliance.

NATO and AUKUS display significant differences that warrant closer examination. First, about their main structural distinction, while NATO guarantees the collective security of all its members under Article 5<sup>23</sup> of its Charter, AUKUS has been designed solely for cooperation in the field of naval nuclear information. This is reflected in Articles I<sup>24</sup> and II<sup>25</sup>, which reinforce and preserve full state sovereignty over the use of such information; in the event of aggression, there is no obligation of military assistance. Second, NATO has developed a multilateral institutional architecture, with subordinate committees tasked with implementing commitments to military cooperation, as stipulated in Article 9<sup>26</sup>, whereas AUKUS does not provide for the creation of permanent bodies of internal

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<sup>21</sup> Atlantic Council. “This Might Be NATO’s Greatest Struggle Yet - and It’s Global”. Available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/this-might-be-natos-greatest-struggle-yet-and-its-global/>. Accessed on 1 December 2025.

<sup>22</sup> NATO. “Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes”. Available at <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/individually-tailored-partnership-programmes>. Accessed on 1 December 2025.

<sup>23</sup> **Article 5 of NATO:** The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.

<sup>24</sup> **Article I of AUKUS:** While the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia are participating in international arrangements for their mutual defense and security and making substantial and material contributions thereto, each Party may communicate to and exchange with the other Parties information, in accordance with the provisions of this Agreement, provided that the communicating Party determines that such cooperation will promote and will not constitute an unreasonable risk to its defense and security.

<sup>25</sup> **Article II of AUKUS:** Each Party may communicate to or exchange with the other Parties naval nuclear propulsion information as is determined to be necessary to research, develop, design, manufacture, operate, regulate, and dispose of military reactors, and may provide support to facilitate such communication or exchange, to the extent and by such means as may be mutually agreed.

<sup>26</sup> **Article 9 of NATO:** The Parties hereby establish a Council, on which each of them shall be represented, to consider matters concerning the implementation of this Treaty. The Council shall be so organised as to be able to meet promptly at any time. The Council shall set up such subsidiary bodies as may be necessary; in particular it shall establish immediately a defence committee which shall recommend measures for the implementation of Articles 3 and 5.

political or military governance. Instead, it is based on cooperation within existing national frameworks. Third, as its very name suggests, NATO implicitly delimits the territorial scope of its operations, whereas AUKUS is established in a context of rivalry with China, fostering a “military counterbalance” in the region without defining a specific geographical area of operation. Finally, Article 3<sup>27</sup> of NATO establishes that allies must develop joint defense capabilities to prepare for potential aggression. By contrast, AUKUS specifically regulates the transfer of naval nuclear technology, focusing on a defense domain that may be considered a “niche” area.

In conclusion, AUKUS cannot be strictly defined as a “NATO for the Indo-Pacific”, given the substantial differences between the two arrangements, particularly regarding mutual defense clauses. Nevertheless, if the establishment of a technical-military agreement is understood as an attempt to create a strategic architecture through which the United States can consolidate its leadership in the region, it is possible to identify certain similarities between the two treaties that have been adapted to their respective geostrategic contexts. Moreover, the existence of AUKUS exemplifies the U.S. shift toward an interest-based minilateralism, which contrasts with the liberal multilateralism centered on the promotion of shared values and broad normative frameworks that predominated throughout much of the twentieth century. Indeed, Washington is now clearly pursuing, in line with a pragmatic logic, smaller and more selective coalitions that offer differentiated instruments -such as technology, security, or access to resources- to each partner, depending on the strategic benefit they provide<sup>28</sup>.

### 3. China in the Indo-Pacific

The People’s Republic of China is the major power in the Indo-Pacific region due to its military, diplomatic, and economic capabilities. However, its capacity to exert influence

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<sup>27</sup> **Article 3 of NATO:** In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.

<sup>28</sup> As shown by the bilateral agreements promoted by the Trump administration in October 2025 with countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, and Australia for cooperation in critical minerals and the promotion of industrial partnerships. While the agreements signed with Malaysia and Thailand were solely aimed at deepening the cooperation ties between the two nations, with Japan and Australia, the United States prioritized the deployment of capital in strategic projects. For more information, see CRITICAL QUESTIONS TO GRACELIN BASKARA AND MEREDITH SCHWARTZ. (October 31, 2025). “Ahead of APEC, Trump signs a series of bilateral agreements on minerals during Asia tour”. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

has also generated controversy among countries within the region itself, as well as among other major Atlantic powers such as the United States. One of the most prominent examples is the issue of reunification with Taiwan, which constitutes one of China's principals and most controversial territorial claims. This claim is grounded in historical and political arguments that endow it with symbolic and political value, both of which are vital to China's national integrity. The political reality of "One China" is one of the central pillars for understanding the geopolitical context of the region and the dynamics of Sino-U.S. rivalry. Indeed, China maintains as one of its cores claims the South China Sea, which it frames as an integral part of its national identity based on the country's historical narrative. This has resulted in a sustained and active military and fishing presence in disputed areas<sup>29</sup>, as well as the construction, since 2013 of artificial islands on contested reefs such as Mischief Reef and Subi Reef. These have been equipped with military bases, ports, and air defense systems, becoming infrastructures that project Chinese influence throughout the region<sup>30</sup>. This discord has led China to reject the validity of the guidelines established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which it considers unsatisfactory or insufficient for delimiting its territorial integrity, as they disregard China's historical reality and rely solely on international law. Furthermore, in 1992, China promulgated a law incorporating the aforementioned islands as part of its sovereign territory, thereby ignoring areas designated as Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of other states and reserving the right to defend them<sup>31</sup>. Although the 2016 ruling of the arbitral tribunal convened to resolve the territorial dispute brought by the Philippines against China dismissed the legal validity of China's claims in accordance with Article 3 of UNCLOS, Beijing has continued to reject this decision<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> China, through the concept of the "South China Sea", claims nearly 90% of the territory invoking 'historical rights' based on imperial presence in the region. This argument is grounded in the "Nine-Dash Line Map" of 1948, which can be found in texts such as the *Book of the Former Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE)* that record commercial interactions and maritime routes of the Han in the sea, as well as maps from the *Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)* that also justify Chinese presence. This map asserts Chinese sovereignty over all islands and adjacent waters within the line, including the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos. This territorial claim directly confronts the established jurisdictions of other littoral states (such as Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Vietnam), generating a significant dispute over sovereignty and control of maritime resources. For more information, see OBSERVATORIO ESTRATÉGICO DE LOS MARES DE CHINA. "Situación estratégica: Mar de China Meridional". Universidad de la Defensa Nacional. Accessed October 21, 2025. [https://www.undef.edu.ar/fmc/maresdechina/situacion-estrategica\\_mar-de-china-meridional.php](https://www.undef.edu.ar/fmc/maresdechina/situacion-estrategica_mar-de-china-meridional.php). lowyinstitute

<sup>30</sup> ZHAO, S. "East Asian Disorder: China and the South China Sea Disputes". *Asian Survey*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490–509. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://online.ucpress.edu/as/article/60/3/490/110498/East-Asian-DisorderChinaand-the-SouthChina-Sea>

<sup>31</sup> PAREDES, X. R. "The Crises in the Chinese Seas: Geopolitical and Security Implications". In *Strategic Panorama 2013*, pp. 139–167. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Madrid, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> PERALTA, M. C., & RADULOVICH, N. "The South China Sea Conflict after the UNCLOS Ruling: The Case of the

For the People's Republic of China, the Indo-Pacific is not merely a maritime outlet surrounding its territory, but also the cornerstone of its economic and strategic future within international society. This perspective is essential for understanding the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its objective of consolidating Chinese influence in the region through its primary strategy: "commercial diplomacy"<sup>33</sup>. One of the most prominent examples of this strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>34</sup>, presented by Xi Jinping in 2013 with the aim of linking Asia, Europe, and Africa and boosting trade. Without the BRI, it would be impossible to understand how China currently engages with the world, particularly through control over port facilities and the establishment of spheres of influence. For the CCP, this strategy is also fundamental to avoiding the so-called "Malacca Dilemma"<sup>35</sup>, which refers to China's excessive dependence on this maritime chokepoint for trade and energy transport between Asia and Europe.

The importance of maritime domains for China is such that it possesses the world's largest maritime combat force<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, China's maritime influence is not limited to naval power alone, but also extends to port control. In fact, China owns or operates ports on every continent (except Antarctica), with a total of 129 port projects, of which 115 were active and 14 suspended as of July 2024 due to financial, political, or environmental issues. This is one of the reasons why China is the world's second-largest economy and conducts approximately 95 percent of its international trade via maritime routes, with cities such as Shanghai hosting the world's busiest container port for thirteen consecutive years as of 2022. It is worth emphasizing that port investments have increased significantly since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". To achieve its maritime trade objectives, China has concluded 70 bilateral

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Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China". *Journal of Social Sciences*, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Commercial Diplomacy is a branch of economic diplomacy focused on promoting a country's commercial and economic interests abroad. This practice has as its main objective to facilitate international trade, attract foreign investment, and open markets for domestic companies. For more information, consult FANJUL, Enrique. "Commercial Diplomacy and the Internationalization of the Economy and Business". *Real Instituto Elcano*, April 18, 2013. Accessed November 2, 2025. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-diplomacia-comercial-y-la-internacionalizacion-de-la-economia-y-la-empresa/realinstitutoelcano+1>

<sup>34</sup> The "Belt and Road Initiative" is a project aimed at developing the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", seeking to promote trade, infrastructure construction, financial integration, as well as cooperation and openness among peoples. For more information, consult CHINA.ORG.CN. "The Belt and Road Initiative". July 19, 2022. Accessed November 16, 2025. [http://spanish.china.org.cn/specials/china\\_key\\_words/2022-07/19/content\\_78330591.htm](http://spanish.china.org.cn/specials/china_key_words/2022-07/19/content_78330591.htm)

<sup>35</sup> The Strait of Malacca is located between Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia and is one of the main maritime passages in the Indo-Pacific.

<sup>36</sup> PALMER, A., CARROLL, H., & VELÁZQUEZ, N. "Unpacking China's Naval Buildup" [online]. Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2024. Accessed October 22, 2025, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-chinas-naval-buildup>

and regional shipping agreements with 66 countries or regions, allowing its network of shipping routes and services to cover much of the globe (data updated as of September 2023). For this reason, China's greatest global potential lies in its strategic investment in highly connected and active ports, enabling it to influence global flows of goods without relying solely on the construction of overseas military naval bases. Likewise, even though China maintains relatively few naval bases abroad, its extensive control over and investment in key commercial ports allows it to exert significant geo-economic influence over major maritime routes and global supply chains. Indeed, many of the ports in which China holds stakes are designed with physical characteristics (such as draught depths of between 12 and 15 meters, large berths, and integrated logistics and supply networks) that would allow them to accommodate Chinese warships<sup>37</sup> (including destroyers, frigates, aircraft carriers, and cruisers)<sup>38</sup>.

From a strategic-military linkage perspective, it is evident to China that the fact that the United States has signed the largest number of defense treaties in the region as a military power limits Beijing's ability to establish strategic ties with some of the most relevant regional actors. Consequently, the CCP has opted to strengthen its influence through "commercial diplomacy", finding in economic agreements and partnerships -such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which extends even to Latin America and the Caribbean, albeit at a slower pace following the pandemic- a new opportunity for engagement. Indeed, China has become the world's leading exporting economy, the largest global creditor, and the primary trading partner of more than 120 countries, demonstrating the global reach of its influence<sup>39</sup>.

The international strategy currently pursued by Xi Jinping clearly corresponds to a leadership role among countries encompassed by the term "Global South". For China, these states offer significant opportunities for cooperation, reflecting Beijing's strong commitment to an international multilateralism that seeks to create opportunities to alter

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<sup>37</sup> However, it is always necessary to take geostrategic realities into account to assert that a port could be used for military purposes. While most ports possess the required physical characteristics, in some ports (such as the Port of Los Angeles in the United States) this would be unthinkable, whereas in ports like Piraeus in Greece, visits by Chinese naval flotillas have occurred under the pretext of "friendship" exercises.

<sup>38</sup> COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. "Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports". 2024. Accessed October 10, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/tracker/china-overseas-ports>

<sup>39</sup> SPANISH INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES (IEEE). Strategic Overview 2025. Higher Center for National Defense Studies (CESEDEN), Madrid, 2025. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/panorama-estrat%C3%A9gico-2025>

the established global hierarchy<sup>40</sup>. In a world undergoing constant change, China views multilateralism as the “logical option for responding to global challenges”, particularly in the Asia-Pacific, always emphasizing cooperation to achieve a context of shared gains for all parties. This approach underscores the importance of advancing regional economic integration, which China refers to as the “Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area”, while promoting regional economic growth and respecting the diversity of national economic models<sup>41</sup>.

The tariffs imposed by the Trump administration represent a significant escalation following decades of inter-systemic competition between China and the United States. Although China has been one of the main beneficiaries of the globalization process, this does not exempt it from facing substantial challenges<sup>42</sup> as it seeks to capitalize on the spaces left vacant by U.S. retrenchment through a strategy of indirect confrontation. By contrast, President Trump chose to shift the conflict into the economic sphere through the imposition of global tariffs<sup>43</sup>, with the objective of regaining control over the market rules under which U.S. companies operate in China and compelling allies to align with Washington’s position, ultimately harming the economies of both countries. One potential consequence of this strategy is a return to trade regionalization, in which both powers strengthen their domestic markets, while China, for example, concentrates its attention on alternative sources of opportunity such as the Belt and Road Initiative. In this sense, these seemingly “simple” tariffs could mark the beginning of a structural transformation of the international system, giving rise to a new and confrontational bipolarity between two great powers<sup>44</sup>.

The situation in the Indo-Pacific cannot be understood without considering the role played by Japan as one of the region’s principal actors. Although it had previously operated

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<sup>40</sup> MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA. “Xi Jinping Sends Congratulatory Message to the Global South Media and Think Tanks Forum”. November 10, 2024. Accessed November 2, 2025. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/wjb/zjig/ldmzs/xwlb/202503/t20250303\\_11566943.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/wjb/zjig/ldmzs/xwlb/202503/t20250303_11566943.html)

<sup>41</sup> In fact, regarding the commitment to multilateralism, President Xi Jinping, in his speech at the CEO Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum, stated that China genuinely aims to uphold international multilateralism, promoting various strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative, among others. For more information, see MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA. “President Xi Jinping Delivers Written Speech at the APEC CEO Summit”. October 31, 2025. Accessed November 2, 2025. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/zxxx/202510/t20251031\\_11745131.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/zxxx/202510/t20251031_11745131.html)

<sup>42</sup> For example, China has only 7% of the world’s arable land and 6% of the water resources available to supply 11% of the global population.

<sup>43</sup> These are imposed by the administration of Donald Trump on Chinese products, aiming to redistribute the benefits of international trade, rebalance market access, and limit China’s economic rise.

<sup>44</sup> AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico. *Universal Tariffs. A New Phase in the Confrontation between China and the United States*. IEEE Analysis Paper 55/2025.

under the auspices of the United States, particularly until the 1990s, Japan has since transitioned toward a more active and strategically relevant position. This shift has coincided with China's resurgence as a major global power, marked by its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, which also brought about significant changes in the regional balance. In response to this transformation, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe adopted a new strategic approach known as "proactive diplomacy", aimed at defending democratic values and the rule of law. One of the most significant outcomes of this approach was the strengthening of strategic defense alliances with countries such as India and the United States, particularly under the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty signed in 1951. Following Abe's assassination in 2022, additional strategic documents were approved<sup>45</sup> with the objective of consolidating Japan's relationship with the United States as the central pillar of its national and regional defense. This was reflected in high-level bilateral engagements, such as the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) meeting held in January 2023. Within these documents, Japan has also taken a clear stance against recent Chinese activities in the South China Sea, a position that has contributed to Japan's closer alignment with other U.S. strategic partners, most notably South Korea. However, Sino-Japanese relations are not defined solely by strategic rivalry (particularly evident in competition over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands) but also by a strong degree of economic interdependence, as China is currently Japan's largest trading partner<sup>46</sup>. Despite this rivalry, Chinese President Xi Jinping, during the 2nd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting held in the South Korean city of Gyeongju on October 31, 2025, emphasized to the Japanese prime minister the need to establish a close and mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries, not only as essential actors in the region but also within the broader international community. Xi further stressed the importance of strengthening a more stable strategic relationship and becoming partners in various economic sectors without posing mutual threats, while also reiterating support for Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. Finally, Xi urged Japan to promote and practice

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<sup>45</sup> The National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Strengthening Program were approved.

<sup>46</sup> SPANISH INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES (IEEEE). Strategic Panorama 2025. Superior Center for National Defense Studies (CESEDEN), Madrid, 2025. Consulted on November 16, 2025, at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/panorama-estrat%C3%A9gico-2025>

multilateralism in the region, thereby contributing to the construction of an Asia-Pacific community<sup>47</sup>.

### **3.1. ASEAN: A Multilateral Approach**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)<sup>48</sup> was established on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand. Its founding members were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, and between 1984 and 1999 Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia also joined. These ten states currently constitute ASEAN, without which it would be impossible to understand the geostrategic relations that shape the Indo-Pacific. The dialogue relationship between China and ASEAN began in 1991, when the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs attended ASEAN's 24th meeting. Since then, China has shown sustained interest in cooperation with the organization, eventually becoming ASEAN's largest trading partner in 2009. In turn, by 2020 ASEAN had become China's largest trading partner, establishing a mutually essential commercial relationship<sup>49</sup>. ASEAN functions as the institutional anchor of the Indo-Pacific; however, it is not formally defined, which grants it flexibility, it is constantly challenged by parallel initiatives driven by external powers, and it plays a connective role among states while possessing limited capacity to implement effective decisions<sup>50</sup>.

Cooperation between China and ASEAN is primarily framed within the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), which was created based on the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation signed in 2002 and which entered into force in 2003. This agreement was amended in subsequent years<sup>51</sup> to adapt to the evolving economic and commercial needs of the region. In November 2015, the ACFTA Upgrade

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<sup>47</sup> THE STATE COUNCIL INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA. "Xi says China ready to work with Japan to build constructive and stable bilateral relations". China Daily, November 1, 2025. Consulted on November 3, 2025, at [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202511/01/content\\_WS69054593c6d00ca5f9a073b0.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202511/01/content_WS69054593c6d00ca5f9a073b0.html)

<sup>48</sup> ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS. "About Us". Consulted on October 15, 2025, at <https://asean.org/about-us/>

<sup>49</sup> ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS. "ASEAN-China Economic Relation". Consulted on October 15, 2025, at <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/>

<sup>50</sup> HOANG, T. H. "Understanding the institutional challenge of Indo-Pacific minilaterals to ASEAN". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs44-1a.jstor>

<sup>51</sup> In 2002, the "Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation" was signed; in 2004, the "Agreement on Trade in Goods" was signed, eliminating tariffs on numerous agricultural products; in 2005, measures on technical barriers to trade as well as sanitary and phytosanitary measures were introduced; in 2007, the "Agreement on Trade in Services" was signed; and in 2009, the "Investment Agreement" was signed.

Protocol was signed in Kuala Lumpur during the 27th ASEAN Summit and entered into force in 2016. This update introduced several key improvements, implemented in 2019, including new provisions on customs and trade facilitation, the promotion and facilitation of investment, new areas of economic and technical cooperation, and a future work program that envisaged further liberalization of trade in goods, a review of product-specific rules, and the promotion and protection of investment. In fact, ACFTA does not focus solely on trade, but also on economic and technical cooperation. China even provided an additional fund, the “ASEAN-China Grant”, aimed at supporting the implementation of this framework<sup>52</sup>. The October 2024 negotiations further modernized the agreement by incorporating areas such as digital cooperation, green trade, and strategic investment, which proved crucial for ensuring China’s access to regional markets and mitigating the growing wave of Western protectionism. Nevertheless, some experts have warned that this reform may entail risks of creating an asymmetric relationship for ASEAN, as China could capture a greater share of value added in trade while relegating other member states to secondary roles, particularly as assemblers or exporters of raw materials. Consequently, the future development of China-ASEAN relations will depend on the region’s ability to act collectively and to balance China<sup>53</sup> through a multilateral approach.

On October 28, 2025, China signed an expanded version of the free trade agreement with ASEAN, known as the “ASEAN-China Free Trade Area 3.0”. This renewal aims to encompass a market of more than two billion people and seeks to reduce tariffs, promote services and investment, and strengthen supply chains and sustainability across the region<sup>54</sup>. This milestone clearly illustrates the multilateral approach China adopts in engaging with regional states through ASEAN<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS. “ASEAN-China Economic Relation”. Accessed October 26, 2025. <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/eurasiareview>

<sup>53</sup> GARCÍA, T. “China and ASEAN: From Free Trade to Strategic Competition in 2025”. CEIPED, 2025. Accessed October 20, 2025. <https://ceiped.org/china-y-asean-del-libre-comercio-a-la-competencia-estrategica-en-2025>

<sup>54</sup> EURONEWS. “China expands a free trade agreement with several Southeast Asian nations”. October 28, 2025. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://es.euronews.com/2025/10/28/china-amplia-un-tratado-de-libre-comercio-con-varias-naciones-del-sudeste-asiatico>

<sup>55</sup> XINHUA. “Update of FTA 3.0 between China and ASEAN will inject greater confidence and boost regional and global economic growth”. October 28, 2025. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://spanish.xinhuanet.com/20251028/570be641134b45689a0fd0351cfb2e70/c.html>

However, multilateralism in Asia is also complicated by rising regional risks, great-power competition, and the proliferation of minilateral agreements. These challenges are exacerbated by ASEAN's strong emphasis on consensus and autonomy, which complicates decision-making on sensitive issues such as security and maritime disputes, leading to significant delays and, at times, paralysis. This dynamic has enabled China to consolidate a leadership position in its relationship with ASEAN, as it has often encountered fragmented blocs that fail to present a unified and robust stance. In response, the United States has promoted minilateral arrangements in the region, such as the QUAD and AUKUS<sup>56</sup>, as previously discussed.

It is impossible to understand the geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific without examining the role played by ASEAN in both alliance formation and the perpetuation of influence, particularly about China. For Beijing, ASEAN serves as a tool for maintaining regional stability while also counterbalancing U.S. influence through economic cooperation and commercial diplomacy. China is, in fact, the principal trading partner of this regional organization, with essential linkages such as the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the Belt and Road Initiative. This trade-based relationship is primarily grounded in infrastructure development, manufacturing, and services, and is further promoted through multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Although China maintains close ties with ASEAN, its relationships with the individual member states vary significantly in terms of strategies and policies. Notably, China faces serious maritime sovereignty disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam over the delimitation of the South China Sea. Thus, despite being economic and trade partners, territorial disputes frequently generate distrust and hinder the normalization of relations. At times, this conflict is exacerbated by U.S. rhetoric and influence, particularly when Washington emphasizes Vietnam's sovereignty over the South China Sea islands. Indonesia and Singapore occupy a similar position due to their concerns regarding China's expansive ambitions and maritime delimitation claims, despite maintaining close economic and commercial ties that may yield substantial benefits in the future. Singapore has been highly dependent on the Belt and Road Initiative in recent years. By contrast, countries such as Malaysia and Brunei maintain relatively stable economic cooperation

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<sup>56</sup> CHONG, Byron. "The Future of Multilateralism in Southeast Asia". Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, September 13, 2024. Accessed October 5, 2025. <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/app-policybrief-byron-chong/>

with China. Brunei has not only historically enjoyed positive relations with China, but today Beijing is also one of its principal trading partners, without which Brunei's economic and infrastructural development would be difficult to understand. Similarly, Malaysia has built a relationship of economic cooperation with China, especially within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, Cambodia<sup>57</sup>, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have emerged as closely aligned actors with strong economic ties to China<sup>58</sup>.

Regarding the United States and ASEAN, following Obama's 2011 announcement of the "Pivot to Asia", attracting ASEAN countries into its sphere of influence has become essential for the U.S., as success in this effort would enable the containment of China, its main rival for global hegemony. However, historical, economic, and political differences between the United States and Southeast Asia have impeded the formation of a unified alliance capable of countering China. As a result, the U.S. has promoted more flexible mechanisms, such as the QUAD and AUKUS, while also consolidating its position as one of the region's most important economic partners for the ASEAN's countries<sup>59</sup>. In terms of security, the United States maintains traditional military alliances with countries like the Philippines<sup>60</sup> and Thailand<sup>61</sup>, providing military assistance, defense cooperation, and strategic presence to sustain its influence.

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<sup>57</sup> Cambodia has spent several years modernizing and strengthening its armed forces due to rising border tensions with Thailand (which maintains a strategic relationship with the United States), technical and financial assistance from China, and the government's desire to establish itself as a regional power center. In fact, China has financed the reconstruction and modernization of the Ream Naval Base, which could serve as a strategic point for China in terms of its naval geostrategic capacity. For more information, see HIDALGO GARCÍA, María del Mar. *Thailand and Cambodia: a border of friction*. In *Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts 2025*, Chapter Eight, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE-CESEDEN), Madrid, 2025, pp. 181–201. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/busqueda?q=MAR+HIDALGO+GARC%C3%8DA+Tailandia+y+Camboya%3A+Una+frontera+de+fricci%C3%B3n>

<sup>58</sup> SHI, Y. "An analysis of the relations between ten ASEAN countries and China in the context of Indo-Pacific strategy". *International Relations and Diplomacy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2025, pp. 23–27. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2025.01.003>

<sup>59</sup> SHI, Y. "Un análisis de las relaciones entre los diez países de la ASEAN y China en el contexto de la estrategia del Indo-Pacífico". *International Relations and Diplomacy*, vol. 13, núm. 1, 2025, pp. 23–27. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2025.01.003>

<sup>60</sup> The United States and the Philippines maintain a strong military alliance based on the *Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951*, the *Visiting Forces Agreement of 1998*, and the *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement of 2014*. Additionally, the Philippines is a NATO partner country, and the U.S. Department of State emphasizes intelligence sharing, coordination on regional security and peacekeeping missions, the promotion of stability in the Indo-Pacific, and the commitment to mutual assistance in the event of aggression. For more information, see U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE. "U.S. Security Cooperation With the Philippines". 2025. Accessed November 12, 2025, at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-philippines>

<sup>61</sup> Thailand is a major non-NATO ally, and therefore maintains a strategic relationship with the United States covering areas such as defense (including the annual organization of joint military exercises like *Cobra Gold*), military assistance, training, and military modernization programs. For more information, see U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE. "U.S. Security Cooperation With Thailand". 2025. Accessed November 3, 2025, at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-thailand>

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In terms of conflict resolution in the region, China has demonstrated willingness to work with the parties involved in disputes, such as in Myanmar, aiming to achieve a cessation of hostilities, maintain stability, and guarantee national security. This aligns with China's adherence to the principles of regional peace and stability, consistent with its role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. However, the Chinese government strictly upholds the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, applying it to all bilateral and multilateral interactions. China has emphasized that Myanmar is a fundamental member of ASEAN and essential for maintaining the organization's unity, thereby supporting ASEAN's mediating role in the conflict<sup>62</sup>. Similarly, in the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, China recognizes both as ASEAN members and considers that such conflicts should be resolved through the organization to preserve regional unity<sup>63</sup>. For instance, Lin Jian, spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated during a press conference on October 17, 2025, that China supports both Thailand and Cambodia in managing and resolving their border disputes through ASEAN, while also backing Malaysia in its role as the organization's rotating chair<sup>64</sup>. This demonstrates China's preference for addressing regional conflicts via a multilateral approach facilitated by ASEAN.

After analyzing the role played by ASEAN, it can be affirmed that the organization acts as a guarantor of multilateralism<sup>65</sup> in the region. In this context, China has consolidated

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<sup>62</sup> XINHUA. "China calls for a constructive role to promote stability and development in Myanmar". August 16, 2024. Accessed November 3, 2025, at <https://spanish.xinhuanet.com/20240817/d35046d8eb564a2b8d5fc4f008285f08/c.html>

<sup>63</sup> XINHUA. "China will continue to play a constructive role in the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand". July 27, 2025. Accessed November 3, 2025, at <https://spanish.news.cn/20250728/a8623e855b16494586499e3f7f13fbc1/c.html>

<sup>64</sup> MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA. "Statement on Cooperation in East Asia". October 19, 2025. Accessed November 3, 2025, at [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/xwfw/lxjzzdh/202510/t20251019\\_11736109.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/xwfw/lxjzzdh/202510/t20251019_11736109.html)

<sup>65</sup> Although there are recurrent doubts about the ability of Indo-Pacific countries to build effective multilateralism in a context marked by constant strategic competition between China and the United States, the evidence suggests a more complex and less pessimistic reality. Far from paralyzing regional cooperation, rivalry between the great powers has encouraged countries in the region to strengthen their own mechanisms of coordination and dialogue. In this sense, ASEAN has consolidated itself as a central regional initiative, driven primarily by small and medium-sized powers that, through inclusive multilateral platforms, have managed to expand their strategic room for maneuver. The multilateralism promoted by ASEAN is based on principles of inclusion, consensus, and regional centrality. In this way, small and medium-sized powers do not merely participate passively in an order dominated by larger actors, but instead act as active agents capable of shaping agendas, conditioning the behavior of major powers, and preserving regional stability. Likewise, ASEAN demonstrates that multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific is neither a recent nor a purely reactive phenomenon, but rather the result of long-term historical processes linked to uncertainty over U.S. commitments and the continuity of American leadership in the region. In response to these doubts, countries have opted for strategies of diversification, interdependence, and institutional cooperation, which has contributed to the preservation of a shared rules-based system even in contexts of intense geopolitical rivalry. In conclusion, in an era of diminished hegemony, multilateralism does not disappear, rather, it transforms. For further information, see BA, ALICE D., "Multilateralism's Challenges and Opportunities in an Era of Diminished Hegemony: The United States and ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific",

its own multilateral approach (pragmatic and tailored to its interests) which differs to a great extent from Western institutional models. This “Chinese-style multilateralism” is grounded in economic integration and the maximization of commercial benefits, as evidenced by the ACFTA and infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative. Importantly, the Chinese government avoids imposing conditions on the domestic policies of partner countries when negotiating major agreements, even in contexts of severe instability, elevating ASEAN’s role as a mediating forum. In doing so, China positions ASEAN as the main regional interlocutor and a multilateral platform. For Beijing, ASEAN also serves to consolidate influence and mitigate tensions with both regional and external countries. Moreover, China reinforces its narrative as a leader of the Global South, presenting itself as a power that offers economic cooperation without political interference, thereby enhancing its appeal to regional countries and strengthening its global position.

#### **4. Conclusion: Minilateralism and multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific?**

Undoubtedly, for both China and the United States, the Indo-Pacific is a strategically crucial region that could define the trajectory of their international positions. An analysis of their foreign policies indicates that both powers are engaged in reformulating their global projection strategies, guided by the principles of Realist International Relations theory, and shaped by structural competition in an anarchic world, mutual distrust, and the pursuit of maximum influence. Indeed, the early 21st century has brought a gradual transformation in the international landscape, the instruments of influence, and the actors dominating the global stage. As Neorealism or Structural Realism posits, this new international environment is characterized by a bipolar structure of power centered on the two major axes of influence: the United States and China. Moreover, the continuation of economic, diplomatic, and defensive military actions by both powers could be perceived as threats, potentially triggering a spiral of containment and counteraction that would deepen their rivalry and generate a “security dilemma”.

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in TURNER, Oliver; NYMALM, Nicola; ASLAM, Wali (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of US Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific*, Routledge, London and New York, 2023, Chapter 2.

First, a study of U.S. strategy reveals a clear transition toward a minilateral or bilateral approach, marking a complete departure from its traditional preference for liberal multilateralism that dominated post-Cold War policy. This shift is particularly evident in the Indo-Pacific through alliances such as AUKUS and the QUAD, which are explicitly aimed at containing and countering China's rapid ascent as a global power. Notably, while AUKUS constitutes a technical-military agreement that establishes a strategic architecture in the region, it also reflects the U.S.'s shift under Donald Trump's protectionist presidency, in which mutual assistance is absent. These "mini" alliances allow the U.S. to deter China from taking broader strategic or military actions, share critical technology, and project influence in a key region that will shape the future global order. From a Neorealist perspective, this behavior reflects the pursuit of maximum influence to preserve the United States' international hegemony through alliances with medium powers occupying strategically favorable positions.

Second, an examination of China's stance reveals a clear difference: Beijing adopts a multilateral approach, albeit in a distinctly "Chinese style", where pragmatism and the defense of national sovereignty in domestic affairs are essential. This may be described as "interest-based multilateralism". Key instruments the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and engagement with ASEAN, through which it promotes a network of economic and political cooperation that does not interfere in domestic policies but consolidates China's regional influence. However, it is important to highlight that Chinese multilateralism differs from Western institutional architectures such as the UN or EU. Its primary tool is "commercial diplomacy", through which China builds economic and normative hegemony based on interdependence with other countries, as exemplified by its control over ports around the world. Today, China positions itself as a leader of the Global South, advocating multilateralism adapted to the needs of countries with realities different from those of the West. From a Realist perspective, this strategy represents the expansion of influence through economic or commercial means rather than coercive mechanisms, allowing China to strengthen its position without relying on collective defense arrangements.

The strategies of both countries, although divergent in form, conform to the Realist logic described by the Thucydides Trap. In this framework, the rise of an emerging power,

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China, in this case, poses a threat to the hegemonic position of an established power, the United States. This dynamic generates a near-inevitable competition, explaining the escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific, where every action by one actor -such as trade alliances, bilateral military treaties, or tariffs- can be interpreted as a provocation that fuels a cycle of distrust, characteristic of a security dilemma.

It is important to note that regional balance does not depend solely on U.S. and Chinese actions; other actors, such as India, Japan, and ASEAN, play a fundamental role. These “secondary” actors also operate with deep pragmatism, seeking to maximize benefits without fully aligning with either of the two major spheres of influence. For example, Japan, historically linked to the United States and possessing strategic defense alliances, simultaneously maintains a strong economic interdependence with China, now its largest trading partner. ASEAN plays a crucial role as a dialogue platform for regional actors, primarily united by the pursuit of economic gains. Yet its effectiveness is limited by internal fragmentation and external pressures from other powers.

In conclusion, the current context of the Indo-Pacific cannot be understood without examining this region, where major international powers are developing their principal competitive strategies, with consequences extending globally. While the United States has moved toward strategic minilateralism or bilateralism, China has pursued multilateralism based on economic cooperation and respect for national sovereignty in domestic affairs. Both approaches embody, in different ways, the realist pragmatism of survival, driving the pursuit of influence in a competitive and anarchic international system. Therefore, the contemporary Indo-Pacific can be seen as a manifestation of the Thucydides Trap and the Security Dilemma, where rivalry and economic interdependence coexist, creating a highly unstable equilibrium that will shape the international order in the decades to come.

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