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Javier Fernández Aparicio

Interconnected Conflicts in the Asia-Pacific and Systemic Competition

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Abstract:

The Asia-Pacific has become the principal arena of global competition between the United States and China. Across this vast region, local conflicts, great-power rivalries, the erosion of the rules-based international order, and decisive geographical constraints converge.

East Asia is home to some of the most significant flashpoints, particularly Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula. China seeks to consolidate its regional hegemony and reduce the US presence, whilst Japan and South Korea are strengthening their military and technological cooperation with the United States.

In Southeast Asia, the South China Sea, Myanmar, and the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia highlight ASEAN's limitations, as the bloc is divided between states closer to Beijing and others concerned about China's maritime expansion.

The Indian subcontinent combines the land-based isolation imposed by the Himalayas with enormous maritime significance in the Indian Ocean. The rivalry between India and Pakistan remains shaped by Kashmir, nuclear deterrence and water issues, whilst Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have become arenas of geo-economic competition between India and China.

Finally, the island states of the Indian and Pacific Oceans possess strategic importance disproportionate to their capabilities because of their location and vulnerability to climate change.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, China, United States, Conflicts.

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¹ This document sets out the reflections, adapted for the Asia-Pacific region, that emerged from the panel discussion on interconnected conflicts during the 2nd Geopolitical Conference organised by the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (La Granja, 26–28 May 2026), and are the result of the analysis and conclusions drawn from various discussions between Emilio de Miguel Calabia, ambassador and current consul-general in Guangzhou, and the author. Consequently, the ideas contained herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Introduction: interdependence in the Asia-Pacific

During the 2nd Geopolitics Conference organised by the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (26–28 May 2026), a panel discussion focused on the interconnected conflicts present in today's geopolitical landscape and on how certain recurring themes appear to underpin them; such as the presence and exploitation of these conflicts by the two major powers currently vying for global hegemony — the United States and China — and their impact on the tension between an old, rules-based liberal order and a new reality in which we are witnessing the marginalisation of those rules, or at least the return of an old axiom of history rooted in realism: international relations are, ultimately, mere power relations, which can at times be traumatic.

Furthermore, although in this technological 21st century we seem to have forgotten it, the imponderables of geography remain vital. Seas, mountains, rivers, etc. shape relations, political structures, land and sea routes, spheres of action and influence and, ultimately, also shape the dynamics of conflicts².

All of this—interconnected conflicts, the decline of the rules-based liberal order and the mediatisation of geography—is particularly evident in the Asia-Pacific, undoubtedly the vast and complex arena where global primacy is at stake on this geopolitical chessboard. For the current Trump administration, and previously for the Biden administration, the Pacific is regarded as the sole and key strategic priority for the United States, as demonstrated by the renaming of the Pacific Command³, with China as the main rival and its containment within the Asian region as the primary objective.

In the Asia-Pacific, various interconnected conflicts are taking place, alongside debates regarding the validity of these international rules — primarily those governing maritime routes, though not exclusively—and, of course, the direct or indirect presence of the United States and China in every theatre where disputes are resolved, through the use of force or direct violence, whether between state or non-state actors, from the Indian

² See MARSHALL, T. *Prisoners of Geography: New, Revised and Expanded Edition*. Barcelona, Ediciones Península, 2025. ISBN 978-84-1100-432-9, and KAPLAN, R. D. *The Revenge of Geography*. Barcelona, RBA Libros, 2017. ISBN 978-84-9056-790-6.

³ U.S. PACIFIC COMMAND (USPACOM). 'Department of War Restores U.S. Pacific Command Designation', *Press Releases and Readouts*. 16 June 2026. Available at: [Department of War Restores U.S. Pacific Command Designation > U.S. Pacific Command > Press Releases and Readouts](#) (accessed 22 June 2026).

subcontinent to East Asia, and from the islands of the Indian and Pacific Oceans to South-East Asia.

This paper also addresses, specifically in relation to the Asia-Pacific region, issues that came to the fore during the aforementioned geopolitical conference held last May; these include the exploitation of ongoing or emerging conflicts by the major powers – primarily the United States and China – with the direct or indirect involvement of others, such as India and Russia; the validity—or otherwise—of the rules of international law, the challenges to them and, ultimately, the speed and acceleration with which realities are imposed by force, regardless of legality.

The aim is not to analyse in detail either the history or the characteristics of these states—ranging from the great powers to the middle or regional powers—but rather to provide an update on existing conflicts and their global implications.

As our subject of study, we shall draw on the geographical definition set out in the new *Spanish Strategy for the Asia-Pacific 2026–2029*, which encompasses the sub-regions of Central Asia, East Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia and Oceania⁴, whilst also taking into account the scope of the Indo-Pacific, as used in other strategies, particularly the European Union's 2021 strategy, updated to 2025, which is both broader—as it includes Gulf States and East African countries—and more restrictive, as it excludes Central Asian countries⁵.

Indeed, taking a middle ground between these two strategies, we shall analyse the conflicts in East Asia, South-East Asia, South Asia and the island nations of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, in that order, whilst setting aside Central Asia and the Gulf States, whose dynamics do not influence either the maritime aspect of the continent or the direct rivalry between the major powers within it to such a direct extent.

⁴ MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, THE EUROPEAN UNION AND COOPERATION. *Spanish Strategy for the Asia-Pacific 2026–2029*. Madrid, Government of Spain. 2026, p. 13. Available at: exteriores.gob.es/es/ServiciosAlCiudadano/PublicacionesOficiales/Estrategia-Asia-Pacifico_2026-2029.pdf (accessed 22 June 2026).

⁵ EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE (EEAS) (n.d.). *EU Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-indo-pacific-strategy_en (accessed 22 June 2026).

The Asia-Pacific is undoubtedly the arena in which the hegemony of the two current major powers, China and the United States, is being contested, but it is worth noting the variety of states that may fall within the definition of powers, albeit regional ones.

Middle power is one of the most hotly debated concepts in international relations because there is no agreed definition or definitive list of countries that fit this description. In a basic sense, it refers to countries situated between the great powers and small states; therefore, they do not have the capacity to impose the rules of the international system on their own, but they do possess sufficient economic, diplomatic, military or demographic resources to exert significant influence in specific areas⁶.

A more comprehensive definition might combine structural position, behaviour and credibility. Thus, a middle power is a state with sufficient capacity to influence regional or global affairs, situated between the great powers and minor actors, which seeks to expand its room for manoeuvre through coalitions, institutions and specialised fields. However, its status also depends on bearing the costs of such action—such as upholding the rules, cooperation and a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the great powers—rather than simply using the label when it is convenient⁷.

In the Asia-Pacific region, we have several examples, with diverse approaches to foreign and security policy: some lean more towards one major power or another; others, such as Japan, Indonesia, Australia, India, South Korea and Pakistan, are seeking to achieve greater strategic autonomy.

Interconnected conflicts in East Asia

If there is any sub-region where geography shapes the political reality, it is undoubtedly East Asia. Predominantly maritime, the main economic, demographic and industrial centres are situated on the coasts and depend on sea routes connecting the western Pacific with the Indian Ocean, the Middle East and Europe.

⁶ DE LA CORTE IBÁÑEZ, L. 'Introduction', in *Middle Powers. Moving Towards a Multipolar Order*. Strategy Paper, no. 225. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 2023. Available at:

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_225/CE_225_Introduccion.pdf (accessed 22 June 2026).

⁷ FERNÁNDEZ APARICIO, J. and PANDEY, H. 'The concept of middle power and its strategies: a case study'. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE). 3 June 2026. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/2026-potencias-medias-analisis> (accessed 22 June 2026).

Consequently, seas such as the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the Straits of Malacca and Luzon are crucial for trade, energy supplies and military projection, whilst regional conflict is concentrated precisely on islands, reefs and straits whose territorial extent is small, but which enable claims to exclusive economic zones, fishing resources, potential deposits and control over sea lanes.

Disputes over Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands show that the sea does not act as a border, but rather as a space for strategic competition⁸.

Until recently, any discussion of East Asian geopolitics had to refer to one giant, China, and two middle powers, Japan and South Korea. This characterisation is no longer sufficient⁹. North Korea must be brought into the equation, having emerged to some extent from its isolation through its involvement in the war in Ukraine in support of Russia and the discreet courtship that China has begun in order not to be left on the sidelines.

Finally, there is an extra-regional power, Russia, which wishes to increase its presence in the region. The geopolitics of East Asia is shaped by two conflicts, to the north and south of the region: the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan.

China's objectives in East Asia are hegemony, ousting the US from the region as a provider of security, and the incorporation of Taiwan. Its main tools in the pursuit of hegemony are trade and technology.

China uses access to its market as a means of exerting pressure to ensure that third parties align with its positions. China is Japan's main supplier and the second-largest destination for its exports. For South Korea, it is both its main supplier and the main destination for its exports.

Furthermore, Japan and South Korea have become dependent on Chinese technology and critical minerals. Sixty per cent of the rare earths used by Japan come from China. China also supplies Japan with a whole range of high value-added products: laptops, mobile phones, lithium batteries, photovoltaic cell and semiconductors... In the case of

⁸ PÉREZ GIL, J. *Geopolitics of Asia and the Indo-Pacific*. Madrid: Síntesis, 2020. ISBN 978-84-9171-456-9.

⁹ SPANISH INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES (IEEE). *East Asia: Interdependence as a Cause of Conflict*. Strategy Papers 219. Madrid, Ministry of Defence, Technical General Secretariat, 2023. ISBN 978-84-9091-787-9. Available at: [Strategy Paper 219 – CESEDEN](#) (accessed 22 June 2026).

South Korea, its dependence is significant in terms of semiconductors, batteries and rare earths.

As regards US military cooperation with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan under the Trump administration, this is continuing and is even being strengthened in the technological sphere. With Japan, *Operation Empowerment with Japan* was announced last May. The operation aims at the joint development and production of ballistic missile interceptors and air-to-air missiles.

With South Korea, the aim is to intensify nuclear cooperation in order to advance the development of nuclear-powered submarines. In other words, China has not succeeded in its objective of pushing the US out of the region in the military sphere.

Finally, there is the issue of Taiwan, the reunification of which Xi Jinping wishes to make part of his legacy¹⁰. In recent years, China has stepped up its pressure on the island. It has increased Taiwan's international isolation, with the result that it is now recognised by only 12 states, most of which are small island states with minimal international influence.

China has also created military tension around the island by sending military aircraft and vessels to the surrounding area and by failing to respect the median line of the Taiwan Strait or the air defence identification zone. Chinese military operations follow an unpredictable pattern, which increases the attrition they cause whilst undermining the perception of sovereignty.

During Trump's visit to Beijing from 13 to 15 May 2026, Xi Jinping reminded Trump that Taiwan is a non-negotiable red line. Trump, for his part, adopted a new US approach towards Taiwan, which could be characterised as an incipient disengagement.

Trump suspended the sale of arms worth \$14 billion to Taiwan¹¹. The main reason given is the need for ammunition due to the war in Iran. But there is also the intention to use this package as a bargaining chip with China.

¹⁰ LEE, L. 'China will not tolerate independence for Taiwan, Xi tells island's opposition leader', *Reuters*. 10 April 2026. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-xi-meets-taiwan-opposition-leader-beijing-state-media-says-2026-04-10/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

¹¹ BUCKLEY, C. and CHANG CHIEN, A. 'Trump's Taiwan tactic is already a gift to China', *The New York Times en Español*. 18 May 2026. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2026/05/18/espanol/mundo/trump-taiwan-armas-china.html> (accessed 22 June 2026).

Furthermore, Trump issued a stern warning to the Taiwanese president, Lai Ching-te, that, should he declare independence, he could not count on the US necessarily coming to his aid.

Taiwan's response has been to boost its defensive deterrent capabilities, conducting exercises on how to repel an amphibious assault and deploying US missile systems facing the strait. Taiwan is banking on its geography as an essential component of its defence.

The 160–180 km separating it from mainland China make an amphibious assault extremely difficult. For this reason, the likelihood of China opting for an indirect – rather than an overtly military – approach to the Taiwan issue is the most probable scenario.

The other flashpoint in the region is the Korean Peninsula. Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea has further developed its nuclear arsenal and made it the cornerstone of its grand strategy. North Korea is very mindful of what happened to Gaddafi.

In 2003, Gaddafi abandoned his programme of weapons of mass destruction and his fledgling nuclear programme. The North Koreans believe, surely with good reason, that had Gaddafi possessed the atomic bomb in 2011, the West would not have dared to attack him. In other words, nuclear weapons can act as a safeguard for a middle power.

The 2023 constitutional amendment enshrined the country's status as a nuclear power, and in 2026, the regime declared that this status is definitive and irreversible. The Constitution also stipulates that, should the command and control system or the leader be attacked by hostile forces, North Korea will launch an automatic and immediate nuclear strike¹².

Relations between the two Koreas are currently frosty. In 2023, South Korea partially suspended the 2018 inter-Korean agreement, which aimed to reduce tensions, in response to North Korea's launch of a spy satellite.

¹² KIM, M. S. 'North Korea Revises Constitution, Boosts Kim's Nuclear Authority', *The Chosun Daily*, 6 May 2026. Available at: https://www.chosun.com/english/north-korea-en/20_26/05/06/H6LCAENYVVGZXLNSEWTZ72KO2Y/ (accessed 22 June 2026).

North Korea retaliated by withdrawing completely from the agreement. It destroyed the roads and railways linking the two countries and deployed troops and heavy weaponry along the demilitarised zone.

South Korea's response has been to step up military cooperation with the US, conducting large-scale joint military exercises. It has also resumed propaganda broadcasts via loudspeakers and reactivated military activities near the demilitarised zone.

On the diplomatic front, it is worth noting its coordination with the EU and its efforts at the United Nations General Assembly to challenge North Korea's nuclear status.

In the Ukrainian conflict, the two Koreas find themselves on opposite sides of the divide. North Korea has aided Russia by sending troops, in return for which it has received Russian assistance with military technology. South Korea, for its part, has indirectly transferred artillery shells to Ukraine by sending them to its allies.

Interconnected conflicts in South-East Asia

South-East Asia is characterised by a geography of archipelagos, peninsulas and straits, making it a bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Strait of Malacca, together with the Sunda, Lombok and Makassar Straits, is home to some of the world's most important maritime routes: these carry exports, hydrocarbons and supply chains linking China, Japan and South Korea with the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

This centrality explains the strategic importance of Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as the growing naval presence of China and the United States, amongst others. However, unlike other regions, South-East Asia combines this maritime dimension with immediate land proximity to China.

Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Thailand and Cambodia form part of a continental space where Beijing projects influence through borders, rail corridors, dams, trade, investment and control of the waters of the Mekong¹³.

¹³ ESGUEVA, M. 'China's Hydropolitics Along the Mekong River', *Grey Dynamics*. 31 July 2025. Available at: <https://greydynamics.com/chinas-hydropolitics-along-the-mekong-river/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

On the other hand, South-East Asia is dominated by eleven small and medium-sized powers grouped within ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. At a geopolitical level, their main challenges are to act in a cohesive manner, manage conflicts in their neighbourhood and cope with the overwhelming proximity of the Chinese giant.

The three major conflicts currently facing ASEAN are, in this order, the South China Sea, the civil war in Myanmar and the low-intensity conflict between Thailand and Cambodia:

- 1) From the beginning of the 21st century, China began to adopt a more assertive stance in the South China Sea, laying claim to the entire area enclosed by the 'nine-dash line', which accounts for 80–90 per cent of the sea's total area.

With a view to defusing potential conflicts, the ASEAN countries and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea¹⁴ in 2002, which did not resolve territorial disputes but established principles of conduct, such as the resolution of disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force; respect for international law and, in particular, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; refraining from measures that might complicate or intensify disputes; practical cooperation on issues such as marine environmental protection and the safety of navigation; and confidence- and-building measures such as the voluntary notification of military exercises.

The Declaration, which was not legally binding, also provided for the drafting of a Code of Conduct between the parties, which, 24 years later, has still not been finalised.

The signing of the Declaration has not prevented China from constructing artificial islands on existing reefs and equipping them with military infrastructure. Nor has it prevented incidents of harassment of non-Chinese fishing vessels (particularly Filipino ones) or their expulsion from the area.

The ASEAN countries have failed to adopt a coherent position on this issue, and there has been a lack of solidarity amongst them. Their responses have depended on their geographical location. To highlight a few specific positions: Vietnam and the

¹⁴ ASEAN. 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea'. 2012. Available at: <https://asean.org/declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

Philippines, the countries most affected, have sought to ensure that the Association maintains a firm stance; Thailand and Myanmar, which are not affected by the dispute, have adopted a passive stance, whilst Laos and Cambodia have maintained a position favourable to China.

It is significant that when the Philippines brought an arbitration case before the Arbitral Tribunal in 2013 concerning, amongst other things, the validity of the nine-dash line – a case in which the Tribunal ultimately ruled in its favour in 2016 – the ASEAN countries abstained¹⁵.

- 2) The civil war in Myanmar: on 1 February 2021, the head of the army, General Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup d'état that brought an end to Burmese democracy. Ethnic insurgencies on the country's periphery and the Government of National Unity, a democratic coalition opposed to the military junta, immediately declared their opposition to the regime.

On 21 April 2021, ASEAN set out the five-point consensus in an attempt to resolve the conflict in Myanmar¹⁶. Its aim was to demonstrate that it could manage this regional crisis on its own. The points began with a call for an end to the violence and a request for the utmost restraint from the parties involved; establishing a constructive dialogue to find a peaceful solution to the conflict; appointing an ASEAN Special Envoy to facilitate mediation and the dialogue process; the delivery of humanitarian aid through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre); and the Special Envoy meeting with all parties involved in the conflict.

Although these five points remain ASEAN's diplomatic framework for resolving the conflict, in practice they can be considered to have failed. The military junta never considered any solution to the conflict other than a military one. ASEAN itself was divided, as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and, to some extent, Singapore were

¹⁵ PERMANENT COURT OF ARBITRATION (PCA). 'South China Sea Arbitration: 12 July 2016, PCA Case No. 2013-19', *Peace Palace Library Blog*. 12 July 2016. Available at: <https://peacepalacelibrary.nl/blog/2016/south-china-sea-arbitration-12-july-2016-pca-case-no-2013-19> (accessed 22 June 2026).

¹⁶ BANERJEE, S. and BHATTASALI, A. 'Promises, Principles, and Paralysis: ASEAN's Myanmar Conundrum', *Observer Research Foundation*. 29 November 2025. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/promises-principles-and-paralysis-asean-s-myanmar-conundrum> (accessed 22 June 2026).

opposed to the junta, whilst the remaining countries supported it in one way or another.

Special mention should be made of Thailand which, as a country sharing an extremely long border with Myanmar, distanced itself to some extent and waged war on its own. Its main concern was border stability and, in order to maintain this, it kept channels of communication open with the Burmese military at all times¹⁷.

Five years after the start of the conflict, we can say that ASEAN has failed and that the solution now lies with Russia and China. From 2023 onwards, the ethnic insurgencies launched a series of offensives that enabled them to control sixty per cent of the country. It was the supply of Russian weapons that saved the junta.

China's position is more complicated, as its interests have been to curb illicit trafficking between Myanmar and Yunnan province, put an end to the online fraud centres that had been established on the border with China, and secure the connection between Yunnan and the port of Kyaukpyu on the Indian Ocean, which would help it reduce its dependence on the Strait of Malacca.

China has therefore maintained a pragmatic stance at all times. Its interest does not necessarily lie in the survival of the military junta, but rather in working with those actors who can best safeguard its interests; and, at present, it appears that this actor is the military junta.

Following the electoral farce in which Min Aung Hlaing was declared the winner, he received significant backing from China. From 15 to 19 June 2026, he visited China, met with Xi Jinping, and the visit was accorded state-level status¹⁸.

- 3) The conflict between Thailand and Cambodia: for years there has been a bitter dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple, which lies

¹⁷ BARTER, D. and NAW, S. 'Supporting Myanmar Beyond the "ASEAN Way"', *The Diplomat*. 23 October 2025. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/supporting-myanmar-beyond-the-asean-way/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

¹⁸ ZHAO, J. 'Myanmar's President to Visit China', *China Daily*. 12 June 2026. Available at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202606/12/WS6a2c2783a310986e2b45fb12.html> (accessed 22 June 2026).

on the very border between the two countries, and over overlapping territorial claims in the Gulf of Thailand, in an area that could harbour significant hydrocarbon reserves.

The current dispute, which began on 28 May 2025, has been influenced by Thai domestic politics¹⁹. On 15 June, Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra held a conversation with Cambodian leader Hun Sen, during which she was excessively deferential and even went so far as to criticise certain senior Thai military commanders. The conversation was leaked and led to her downfall three months later.

ASEAN has played a positive role in this conflict. Its rotating chairmanship maintained contact with both sides to encourage direct dialogue. It also encouraged the maintenance of the December 2025 ceasefire.

Given that ASEAN has, on paper, many more tools at its disposal – which it did not utilise – and that both Thailand and Cambodia were, in the final analysis, keen to contain the conflict, ASEAN's intervention can only be described, so far, as moderately disappointing.

Interconnected conflicts in South Asia

South Asia, and more specifically the Indian subcontinent, has a geography that shapes its future. To the north, the Himalayas act as a major physical barrier to Central Asia and China, although this does not eliminate the rivalry over its passes, valleys and border areas — from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh — which remain areas of friction between India and China.

To the south, however, India opens out fully onto the Indian Ocean, whose central position allows it to monitor vital routes between the Persian Gulf, East Africa, South-East Asia and the Strait of Malacca.

¹⁹ HIDALGO GARCÍA, M. M. 'Thailand and Cambodia: a border of friction', in *Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts 2025*, chap. 8. Ministry of Defence, 2025, pp. 181–201. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3087758/PGC2025_Capitulo08.pdf/7a2f16fe-4b82-92ed-7eb2-cf3d48d1ebd0?t=1765797361172 (accessed 22 June 2026).

This combination makes the subcontinent a region that is relatively isolated by land but highly connected by sea. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives form part of a region directly shaped by India's central position.

Regional interdependence is particularly evident when it comes to water. The major river systems—the Indus, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra—originate in the Himalayas and cross borders, meaning that dams, water flows, floods and droughts have immediate political consequences. One example is the crisis between India and Pakistan, with India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty; but China's control over the headwaters of rivers flowing into the Indian Ocean or the Bay of Bengal is also a source of concern and conflict for India itself and other countries such as Bangladesh²⁰.

In May 2025, although stemming from the situation in Kashmir and the Pahalgam attack by a jihadist terrorist group—which India accuses of being backed by Pakistan—a four-day conflict broke out between the two countries, both nuclear powers, marking a turning point in international relations and their position within the global order.

India, as part of its policy of non-alignment and multilateralism – although increasingly oriented towards defending, in its foreign policy, that imperative which allows it to play both sides if it is in the country's interest – appears to be embroiled in a period of uncertainty and some tension with regard to its neighbouring countries, whilst also oscillating between traditionally allied or hostile powers, such as the United States, Russia and China.

By contrast, Pakistan, which just two years ago appeared to be a country facing serious internal, economic, social and political problems — which have by no means disappeared — is positioning itself as a Muslim power that provides security and is close to Washington, although, paradoxically, China remains its main supporter.

The military engagement was perceived less as an exchange of fire and more as a brief, intense test of both armies' ability to adapt to a more complex, multi-domain battlefield, combining air, land, sea and intelligence capabilities.

²⁰ GAJUREL, K. P. 'Water Resources and Geopolitical Tensions in the Himalayas: Analysing Nepal's Mediating Role', *Medha: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 7(1). 2024, pp. 93–106. <https://doi.org/10.3126/medha.v7i1.73899> (accessed 22 June 2026).

As in other recent conflicts, unmanned systems played a prominent role, as did the use of cyber and information technologies, particularly on the part of Pakistan. In fact, the war led to the consolidation of the Pakistani Army's increasingly concentrated power over the state, particularly through the figure of Field Marshal Asim Munir, as well as providing evidence of the effectiveness of Chinese-made equipment and vehicles on the battlefield²¹.

Months after the end of the conflict, Pakistan established a new Army Rocket Forces Command (ARFC), modelled on China, which had created the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force in 2016.

At the same time, India has accelerated development and procurement programmes to enhance these capabilities, including the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system and other air defence and missile systems.

Air defence equipment imported from China, such as the Hong Qi (HQ)-7, HQ-9 and HQ-16 SAMs, or the HQ-19 anti-missile system—designed to counter ballistic missiles at ranges of up to 3,000 km—proved highly effective against India's broader array of French, American and Russian equipment, which was difficult to integrate; not to mention Pakistani surveillance operations, supported by Chinese satellites as well.

Furthermore, whilst Indian operations carried out during the so-called Operation Sindoor involved conventional warfare tactics, such as precision bombing and the neutralisation of air defences, Pakistan responded by reinforcing an asymmetric approach, including electronic warfare, long-range precision strikes and continued investment in low-cost, high-impact systems, such as loitering munitions and small UAVs.

The situation remains highly tense and both countries appear to be preparing for future clashes; for the 2026–2027 financial year, they have announced significant increases in their respective defence budgets²².

²¹ FERNÁNDEZ APARICIO, J. 'India and Pakistan: the scar where the border never sleeps', in *Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts 2025*, chap. 7. Madrid, Ministry of Defence, 2025. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3087758/PGC2025_Chapter07.pdf/b9ece41f-2fe9-7808-19e2-67266f1e035a?t=1765797358097 (accessed 22 June 2026).

²² STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE (SIPRI). 'Global military spending rise continues as European and Asian expenditures surge', *SIPRI*. 27 April 2026. Available at:

For India, this clash was yet another disappointment, as was the lack of involvement from the United States, which, from the outset, had called for an end to the conflict and negotiated a ceasefire agreement, announced by President Trump. This mediation was acknowledged by the Pakistani Government, but not by that of New Delhi.

Shortly afterwards, the US administration imposed tariffs on India, set at 50 per cent, including a surcharge on crude oil purchases from Russia. This led to an initial rapprochement between India and Russia and China, as evidenced by Modi's attendance at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit and the signing of a joint declaration advocating a multilateral order, whilst condemning support for terrorism by certain countries – a supposed reference to Pakistan²³.

The relationship between India and the United States is too complex to be severed, and both countries share an interest in limiting Chinese influence in the region, though it has its ups and downs. Trump's decision to reduce tariffs – not coincidentally coming a week after the signing of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement was announced²⁴ – has been followed by a further cooling of relations and a more recent crisis involving the deaths of Indian sailors in US air strikes during the Hormuz crisis²⁵.

India refuses to become a subordinate ally and wishes to uphold its tradition of strategic autonomy.

For its part, Pakistan has seen its international standing, which it had lost a decade ago, restored. Its current role as a mediator between the United States and Iran, including chairing the signing of the agreement in Geneva, projects Marshal Asim Munir in particular as a key interlocutor in the region for Washington²⁶.

<https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2026/global-military-spending-rise-continues-european-and-asian-expenditures-surge> (accessed 22 June 2026).

²³ 'Putin, Xi, Modi and the Tianjin Pact: full text of the SCO countries' declaration', in *Le Grand Continent*, 2 September 2025. Available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/09/02/putin-xi-modi-y-el-pacto-de-tianjin-texto-integro-de-la-declaracion-de-los-paises-de-la-ocs/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

²⁴ SOLANKI, V. 'The Trump Administration's View of the US–India Relationship', *International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*. 28 April 2026. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/04/the-trump-administrations-view-of-the-usindia-relationship/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

²⁵ MOGUL, R. 'India seafarers' deaths spark anger and questions over maritime security', *CNN*. 12 June 2026. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/06/12/india/india-seafarers-deaths-anger-analysis-intl-hnk> (accessed 22 June 2026).

²⁶ BAÑOS, J. J. 'Asim Munir, the "atomic marshal" whose calls Donald Trump always answers', *La Vanguardia*. 8 April 2026. Available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20260408/11508581/diplomacia-pakistani-negocio-abierto-todas-horas.html> (accessed 22 June 2026).

This resurgence includes an agreement for US corporations to exploit Pakistani rare-earth deposits and the release of IMF aid, amounting to some \$4.5 billion in loans, which had previously been frozen due to concerns that it might be used to pay for projects and debts owed to China.

However, it would be an exaggeration to speak of a structural recovery, as Pakistan remains a fragile state, with domestic politics increasingly dominated by the influence of the army, which limits civilian legitimacy; terrorism, which continues to exert constant pressure, particularly in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan — which even jeopardises the infrastructure and routes linked to China —; and, above all, an open war on the Afghan border against the Taliban regime, which Islamabad accuses of harbouring the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan.

And yet another front is opening up, with serious protests—resulting in fatalities—in Pakistani Kashmir²⁷.

Broadening the focus beyond South Asia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal have also become arenas for the rivalry between India and China. In all three cases, the competition does not necessarily take the form of direct confrontation, but is expressed through investment, infrastructure, credit, connectivity, political support and the ability to influence governments facing strong internal pressure.

In Nepal, the youth revolution of 2025 and the March 2026 elections handed a large majority to Balen Shah's new Rastriya Swatantra party, which advocates a policy of balance – a difficult task in a country that is economically and geographically dependent on India, compounded by China's growing offer of infrastructure, trade and connectivity.

The same is true in Bangladesh, where the fall of Sheikh Hasina in 2024 and the February 2026 elections have profoundly altered the political landscape. The victory of Tarique Rahman's BNP brought to an end a period of concentrated power and close personal ties between Hasina and New Delhi, whilst at the same time there has been a rise in Islamist forces that are not exactly favourable to an India under Modi's Hindutva government.

²⁷ AMINO GONZÁLEZ, J. 'Pakistan Kashmir unrest leaves 8 dead', *Deutsche Welle (DW)*. 3 October 2025. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-kashmir-unrest-leaves-8-dead/a-74223546> (accessed 22 June 2026).

Consequently, for China, this new context offers an opportunity to expand its economic presence, particularly through infrastructure projects and investment centred on the Teesta River and Chittagong.

Finally, Sri Lanka represents, perhaps, the most visible case of geo-economic rivalry. The 2022 financial crisis left the country extremely dependent on foreign aid and turned its ports, debt and infrastructure into strategic issues, where China holds a significant position due to its presence in Hambantota and Colombo, as well as its role as a creditor and investor, surpassing that of India.

Interconnected conflicts in the oceans

Geographically speaking, the island nations of the Indian and Pacific Oceans combine significant internal vulnerability with great strategic importance. Climate change is their main determining factor, with rising sea levels, coastal erosion, the salinisation of aquifers, cyclones and the destruction of infrastructure threatening the very habitability of states such as the Maldives, Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands²⁸.

At the same time, their position on maritime routes and within exclusive economic zones gives them a geopolitical value that exceeds their size. The Maldives lies at the heart of naval communications in the Indian Ocean, whilst the Pacific archipelagos allow for the monitoring of corridors between Australia, Hawaii, East Asia and the American coast. Their waters are rich in fisheries, contain some critical seabed minerals and host an extensive network of telecommunications cables.

Thus, the rivalry between China and the United States in the Indian Ocean and Oceania does not take the form of two closed blocs, but rather that of a competition for infrastructure, resources, maritime presence and the ability to offer solutions to local problems.

The Maldives, situated along key routes between the Persian Gulf and East Asia, have seen this competition play out in their own domestic politics. The elections and the coming

²⁸ WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANISATION (WMO). 'Climate Change Transforms Pacific Islands', *World Meteorological Organisation*. 27 August 2024. Available at: <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/climate-change-transforms-pacific-islands> (accessed 22 June 2026).

to power of Mohamed Muizzu were interpreted as a shift towards China, in contrast to the previous closeness to India. His campaign, characterised by the slogan ‘India Out’, reflected a rejection of India’s military and technical presence, whilst China stepped up its offer of loans, infrastructure and economic cooperation²⁹.

Something similar is happening in the Solomon Islands, in the Pacific region. The 2024 elections were dominated by the debate over relations with China, after Manasseh Sogavare’s government signed a security agreement in 2022, which raised concerns among Australia, the United States and their partners regarding the possibility of a Chinese presence in an archipelago situated near the routes between Australia and the Western Pacific³⁰.

Today, the rivalry is not merely about preventing a hypothetical military base. The key is to prevent dependence on China in the form of loans, infrastructure projects and technology – a precursor to total political influence. India, Australia and the United States are responding with maritime cooperation, development aid, surveillance, connectivity and alternative financing through various mechanisms.

The United States retains significant political assets in the region, such as Micronesia, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu, which have frequently aligned their positions with those of Washington and Israel at the United Nations. In a June 2025 vote on Gaza, seven of the twelve ‘no’ votes came from these Pacific island states. These ties include free association agreements, financial aid and a certain military presence.

Another tool is cooperation, for example through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The latest meeting of foreign ministers from the member countries — Australia, the United States, India and Japan — held in New Delhi on 26th May, reinforced initiatives on maritime security, critical minerals, energy, port infrastructure and maritime surveillance.

²⁹ THARAKAN, S. ‘From “India Out” to Opting In: Why Muizzu Recalibrated Ties with India’, *Observer Research Foundation*. 23 June 2025. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/from-india-out-to-opting-in-why-muizzu-recalibrated-ties-with-india> (accessed 22 June 2026).

³⁰ NEEDHAM, K. “Solomon Islands leader visits security partner China with focus on infrastructure”, *Reuters*. 10 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/solomon-islands-leader-visits-security-partner-china-with-focus-infrastructure-2023-07-09/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

The real objective does not appear to be to turn the group into an ‘Asian NATO’ – something made difficult by India’s strategic autonomy and differing national priorities – but rather to build economic and technological alternatives to China’s central role³¹.

Australia is the key military link in this sub-regional architecture. It relies on China as a key trading partner, but its security is tied to the United States, as symbolised by its membership of AUKUS – though this is not without a certain contradiction given the obstacles to Canberra’s aim of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, a project facing challenges relating to costs, industrial capacity and the availability of US and British submarines.

The US 2025 review reaffirmed the political commitment, although it did not eliminate the implementation risks; however, in 2026, doubts have grown regarding timetables and naval production³².

Conclusion and outlook

To conclude and look ahead, the Asia-Pacific is establishing itself as the main arena where the distribution of global power will be decided in the coming decades. Not because all its conflicts follow a single logic, nor because the states in the region are grouped into homogeneous blocs, but because they are the focal point for the rivalry between the United States and China, the erosion of the rules-based international order, the growing autonomy of middle powers, and the persistence of geographical constraints that continue to impose limits or present opportunities for foreign policy.

The sea is the key unifying element in these dynamics. From the Strait of Malacca to Taiwan, from Hambantota to the Solomon Islands, trade routes, ports, undersea cables, exclusive economic zones and energy corridors have become instruments of power. Competition no longer takes place exclusively through military bases, fleets or formal

³¹ KALYANKAR, A. V., THRELKELD, E., OROS, A. and GRIECO, K. A. ‘Takeaways from the Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting’, *Stimson Center*. 27 May 2026. Available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2026/takeaways-from-the-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting/> (accessed 22 June 2026).

³² DZIEDZIC, S. ‘Australia to buy three second-hand United States submarines under AUKUS shake-up’, *ABC News*. 31 May 2026. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-05-31/australia-to-buy-second-hand-united-states-submarines-aukus/106742496> (accessed 22 June 2026).

alliances, but also through debt, infrastructure, technology, critical minerals, digital connectivity and climate aid.

This explains why small and seemingly peripheral states, such as the Maldives or the Pacific archipelagos, possess strategic importance far exceeding their material capabilities, and why organisations such as ASEAN find it so difficult to reach agreements that satisfy all their member states.

For the time being, the outlook does not appear to be one of an immediate, full-scale war between the United States and China, but rather one of prolonged, unequal and fragmented competition, in which the outcome will depend on which country proves more resilient.

Taiwan will remain the main source of risk, as it involves issues of sovereignty, identity, military deterrence and political prestige for both Beijing and Washington. However, the most likely scenarios for conflict will be limited crises, economic coercion, maritime pressure operations, technological competition and the indirect use of local actors backed by different powers.

Examples include the conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, in the South China Sea, in Myanmar, along the India-Pakistan border and in Afghanistan, which are not isolated incidents but are fuelled by shifting alliances, historical rivalries and disputes over routes and resources.

Nowhere is this more true than in the Asia-Pacific, where middle powers will play a decisive, albeit ambiguous, role. India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, South Korea and Pakistan cannot single-handedly determine the regional order, but they can influence its development.

Their behavior will depend less on rhetoric about multilateralism than on their ability to combine strategic autonomy, selective cooperation and credibility. India will continue to avoid full subordination to the United States, even whilst cooperating with Washington against China; Pakistan will attempt to regain centrality with US support, but without reducing its dependence on Beijing; and ASEAN will remain essential as a regional forum, but constrained by its aforementioned internal divisions.

The great unknown will be the ability of international institutions and norms to contain such conflict, particularly in maritime and border areas. Maritime rules, mechanisms for managing shared waters, crisis management agreements and regional organisations may be essential to prevent local incidents from escalating into larger confrontations with implications for third countries or major powers.

Ultimately, the future of the Asia-Pacific will depend on the balance between the current rivalry between China and the United States and the cooperation of the countries within the region. Its geography will define the areas where conflict may arise and spread, both at sea and on land.

Furthermore, in an environment of growing militarisation, climate vulnerability and all-out competition for hegemony, keeping sea lanes open – as we have seen in the Strait of Hormuz crisis – as well as establishing dialogue mechanisms that actually work, whilst respecting states' margins of autonomy, will be fundamental conditions for preventing the region from becoming the main trigger of a global crisis.

Javier Fernández Aparicio

Senior Analyst, IEEE

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