

DECONSTRUCTING DOMINANCE: US – CHINA NARRATIVE CLASH IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

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Abstract

Both United States of America and China have their unique strategic narratives in the Asia Pacific guided by their respective political history. This distinction hampers regional cooperation in the region and compels the world powers to opt for the zero-sum game. The US aims to fill the power vacuum in the region by adopting anti-China policies through alliances build-up, while China seeks to counter American presence through trade and connectivity. One of the major US partners in the Asia Pacific is Australia, which is taken as a case study because it openly advocates for profound political and strategic engagement with the US and has lately garnered world attention through the controversial AUKUS deal. The US perspective receives China's actions in the South China Sea as assertive and its economic and military policies as efforts to reshape regional norms and institutions to serve its strategic interests. By challenging the established order that has fostered stability, China is portrayed as a revisionist power threatening the foundations of the current international system. In response, China's strategic narrative is aimed to project its capacity to shape the international order, economically uplift and link regions through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) using soft power and maintaining its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This duality of narratives underscores the escalating geopolitical tensions and a struggle for dominance and influence in shaping the future of the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: *Dominant Discourse, Asia Pacific, Revisionist Power, Geopolitical Tensions, Soft Power*

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Introduction

The historical and political histories of the US and China are the main drivers shaping the foreign policy contours of the world powers. The lack of homogeneity of these narratives paves the way for two different approaches adopted by the US and China, which act as a stumbling block towards the regional cooperation and help understand the great-power geopolitical rivalries. The Western Asia-Pacific narrative refers to the strategic, economic, and political frameworks and policies promoted by Western countries, primarily the United States and its allies, regarding the Asia-Pacific region. This narrative is shaped by a mix of historical contexts, geopolitical interests, economic imperatives, and security concerns.

From the 1950s to 1970s, the dominant regional narrative in US strategic thinking was the Pacific as an “American Lake.”¹ It was the time when the US started to give the impression that it was the only state responsible and capable of maintaining peace in the Pacific and therefore, entitled to take over any territory or island it considered strategically important. *Manifest Destiny*, a philosophy that drove 19th century US westward territorial expansion across the American continent, had stirred further expansion mainly from California across the Pacific when North American land “ran out.”² The US annexation of Hawaii in 1898 and later its victory in the Pacific War of 1941–1945 against Japan aided the US to act as the Pacific hegemon.³ Since then, the US political and military elites have developed the Asia-Pacific heavily securitized site, justifying Washington’s massive military deployments and construction of naval bases in the Pacific.

The US presidents and policymakers—Republican and Democrat—have consistently identifies ‘Asia Pacific’ as the ‘frontiers of freedom,’ or ‘freedom’s frontiers,’ making it the most prominent site of Washington’s global military-security activity.⁴ US strategic narrative on the ‘frontiers’ persistently lacks conceptual clarity. The US strategic narrative on the Asia Pacific—reveals that the American frontiers are not physically manifested. The notion of ‘frontiers of freedom’ deforms some familiar established concepts around the word ‘frontiers’ and obfuscates their etymological origins—of where they begin and end.⁵ Thus, the American frontier is never

¹ Eleanor Lattimore, “Pacific Ocean or American Lake?” *Far Eastern Survey* 14, no. 22 (November 7, 1945): 313–16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3022436>.

² Oliver Turner, “Frontiering International Relations: Narrating US Policy in the Asia Pacific,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): orac009, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orac009>.

³ David Scott, “The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts,” *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2018): 19–43.

⁴ Oliver Turner, “Frontiering International Relations: Narrating US Policy in the Asia Pacific,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, (2002).

⁵ Ibid.

“there” in terms of space or territory, but remains, a product of interpretation, dependent upon elite policy narratives.

During the westward territorial expansion of the US, under *Manifest Destiny*— a teleological national narrative, indigenous Americans were ascribed meanings that delegitimized their territorial claims. This established their identity separately from the settler Americans, enabling the US assertion of frontiers.⁶ Their customs, values, and beliefs were all defined as threatening and incompatible with the new United States. However, the values and beliefs of indigenous Americans could be interpreted as valuable and compatible with those of European Americans. After all, they were not objectively different from the European Americans. However, the otherizing of the indigenous population imaginatively—narratively legitimized US expansionism westward to the Pacific Ocean.⁷ From safeguarding and separating itself from indigenous Americans to containing communism, the United States is compelled to consistently deploy massive overseas military forces at what are (loosely) perceived and constructed as the present-day frontiers of the American self.⁸

The Chinese, on the other hand, are of the view that the United States, particularly since the era of President Donald Trump, has consistently been relinquishing its strategic engagement policy with China by moving on its national security discourse from the War on Terror in the Middle East to the Asia Pacific region. They perceive the continuous US efforts at bundling up alliances in the region to push back against China as a direct threat to China’s national security as well its desired and legitimate leadership role in the Asia Pacific. Despite not resisting the US through establishing similar security alliances, the Chinese illusion that the US leadership would not object to its peaceful role in the region has also been abundantly removed. Therefore, it does not support any US policy of forming alliances under the guise of ‘like-minded’ or ‘democratic’ grouping and instead presents its own Chinese-style ‘democratic’ model.

The US State Department often made it abundantly clear in its past national security and strategy papers that it ‘is and always will be an Indo-Pacific nation,’ and that it ‘recognizes that the most consequential challenge to U.S. and partner interests is the growing competition between free and repressive visions of the future international order’ and that ‘authoritarian revisionist powers seek to advance their parochial interests at others’ expense.’ These statements allude to China, playing a pivotal role in shaping

⁶ J. T. Heidler, and S. David Heidler, "Manifest Destiny," Encyclopedia Britannica, May 28, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>.

⁷ “The Expedition’s Impact on Indigenous Americans (U.S. National Park Service),” accessed August 3, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/>

⁸ David Vine, “Where in the World Is the U.S. Military? - POLITICO Magazine,” August 2015, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/>

the Chinese strategic narrative, in which it significantly wants to play a major leadership role without any interference on the part of the foreign power, like the US.

Previously, the US would frame the term 'Asia Pacific' by rationalizing its presence in the region as a Pacific nation, but the transformation of the term by the subsequent US administrations from the 'Asia Pacific' to the 'Indo Pacific' signifies the importance of India in the American strategic lexicon. The US policy of bolstering India as bulwark against China, particularly against China's geo-economic strategy embedded in BRI, is perceived as the Chinese encirclement by the US. Therefore, Chinese narrative clearly depicts a notion that the US has no 'innate role to play in the Asian Region.' Also, various Chinese proposals state that 'Asian affairs should be managed by Asians.' China consistently is forging deep economic ties with regional countries, and in fact, it has been able to convince a close security ally of the US, Japan, to become a part of its BRI. This is to exploit divisions among US security partners and streamline opportunities for economic engagements.

Indo-pacific in the American New Strategic Narrative

The US has long asserted its status as a 'Pacific power' and a 'resident power in Asia,' as documented by Michael Green in his work 'More than Providence.'⁹ Washington has advocated this position more proactively with narratives such as "America's Pacific Century," as the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in 2011. Accordingly, the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the US will be right at the center of the action. This was the moment when the US was planning to exit from Afghanistan.¹⁰ Clinton's speech was a signal to dissuade China and others in the region from thinking the United States was abandoning its traditional leadership role in the Pacific.¹¹

This perspective has directed previous strategies like President Barack Obama's Pivot (hereafter, Rebalance policy) and reinforced declarations like "The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay."¹² Obama articulated a political vision for the Asia-Pacific. His vision

⁹ Michael Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783*, illustrated edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Foreign Policy Magazine: America's Pacific Century," U.S. Department of State, October 11, 2011, //2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/

¹¹ Paul Eckert, "Clinton Declares 'America's Pacific Century,'" *Reuters*, November 11, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/>

¹² Stewart M. Patrick, "Obama's Plan for America's Pacific Century," *The Atlantic* (blog), November 25, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/>

emphasized the significance of an open and inclusive system in the Asia Pacific where all nations, including China, adhere to a set of agreed-upon rules. He sought to ensure that no single country (referring to China, again) could unilaterally impose its will by establishing any form of hegemonic dominance or disrupting the stability of the region.

This viewpoint continues to drive the current Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (IPSR).¹³ The report highlights the Indo-Pacific as "the single most consequential region for America's future." The increasingly consistent US assertions regarding its role in the Pacific underscore how China's rise and activities in the Pacific Ocean have unsettled the United States and its allies, primarily Australia, Japan, and New Zealand.

The US and China rivalry is not confined to trade and technology but stretches over global narratives. Narratives are stories constructed to create 'realities' and 'truths' and to give a sense of ourselves and the world around us. Narratives communicate the viewpoint of the narrator(s) about what is a fact or right.¹⁴ They are formulated to give certain events a direction and purpose. Strategic narratives are clearly the products of those with authority, enabling the formulation and execution of their policy preferences. "[s]trategic narratives are ... a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives."¹⁵

Both powers have conflicting and competing strategic narratives over international issues and territorial disputes. Since the Cold War, the United States—sometimes acting together with its allies— has been the leading proponent of the narratives and discourses shaping world politics. As an emerging power, China constructs its own narrative to counter prominent US narratives. Terms such as 'rules-based order,' 'like-minded nations,' and de-risking (modified from 'decoupling') are among the more recent examples of the core mobilizing and rallying ideas central to the US and its key allies' converging (albeit not necessarily coordinated) efforts to render the 'Indo-Pacific' construct into geo-economics and geopolitical realities.¹⁶

¹³ William Choong, "Indonesia, ASEAN and the Return of the Indo-Pacific Strategy - Australian Institute of International Affairs - Australian Institute of International Affairs," 2019, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/>

¹⁴ Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, "Narrative in Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, no. volume 1, 1998 (June 1, 1998): 315–31.

¹⁵ George Dimitriu and Beatrice De Graaf, "Fighting the War at Home: Strategic Narratives, Elite Responsiveness, and the Dutch Mission in Afghanistan, 2006–2010," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 1 (2016): 2–23.

¹⁶ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "Navigating the Narratives of Indo-Pacific: 'Rules,' 'Like-Mindedness,' and 'De-Risking' in the Eyes of Southeast Asia," 2023, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1085043>.

As the United States moved its focus more proactively towards the Pacific Rim region through President Obama's Asian pivot strategy, China instantaneously embarked on a new era.¹⁷ This new era is marked by a deliberate reaffirmation of the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC's) denunciation of American-style democracy while actively cherishing Chinese political ideology and cultural identity.¹⁸ This two-fold approach underlines China's resolve to affirm its influence and showcase its vision for the future in the face of growing US presence and strategic interest in the Asia-Pacific region.

Whereas the US Asian strategy aims to enforce the founding vision of Jefferson's 'Empire of Liberty' in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹ This US strategy emphasizes on upholding democratic values, promoting open markets, and fostering a prosperous and stable regional order by working with like-minded states. The emphasis on the rule of law, transparency, and rule-based order are the central principles of Jefferson's vision, placing the United States as a firm advocate for liberty and justice in the swiftly changing geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific. On the front, this is what the US portrays its strategy in the Asia Pacific, however, in essence, it is in competition with China and using regional major powers and allies to counter China's rise.

The whole US narrative implicitly denounces China and develops its caricatures as an autocratic nation ruled by a tyrant Communist Party, which is adamant about preserving its domestic control through oppressive measures and sabotaging the regional order in the Pacific to thwart US influence.²⁰ This characterization suggests that many of China's foreign policy decisions are driven by a desire to preserve domestic control and perpetuate the ruling Communist Party's authority.²¹ And this dynamic compels the United States to build alliances in the Asia-Pacific with like-minded nations. These nations have similar values and concerns about the challenges posed by the ambitions of authoritarian regimes like China's. The dark thought that China is planning for a world of disorder in the Asia Pacific region is being

¹⁷ David H. Bearce and Seungbin Park, "Putting the Trans-Pacific Partnership Back on the Table," *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2, 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>

¹⁸ Yingjie Guo, "The CCP Returns to Chinese Cultural Roots | East Asia Forum," October 3, 2016, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2016/10/03/>

¹⁹ Patrick Mendis, "Birth of a Pacific World Order: America's First Pacific President and Sino-US Relations," *Harvard International Review* 34, no. 4 (2013): 22-27.

²⁰ Ahmed Aboudouh, "China and Russia Are Proposing a New Authoritarian Playbook. MENA Leaders Are Watching Closely," *Atlantic Council* (blog), February 23, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource>

²¹ Thomas Fingar and David M. Lampton, "China's America Policy: Back to the Future," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 43-63.

articulated incessantly in American mainstream publications and reports.²² This apprehension is rooted in the US perceiving China's foreign policy as assertive, particularly in the South China Sea, its military build-up, and its increasing economic engagement in the countries situated in the region. US perception of this assertiveness is projected as a deliberate effort to reshape international norms and global governing institutions in line with its authoritarian political system.

To contain China's increasing influence in the Pacific region, the United States has taken substantial initiatives to strengthen relations with 'like-minded' nations through building alliances and mini-lateral frameworks like AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in the Pacific region.²³ AUKUS is a trilateral security pact between the US, Australia, and the UK and Quad is a strategic security dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia, and India. Quad aims to protect a liberal trading system, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based global order. The US support for military modernization of its regional allies to elevate them as a military counterweight to China has resulted in arms race in the region. For instance, the AUKUS deal with Australia has raised concerns about reversing of gains in the field of global non-proliferation regime agenda.

Further, hyperbole and erroneous characterizations of China's ambitions have produced uncertainty in the region and prompted debate on how countries in the Asia Pacific should react. The apprehensions about China's perceived expanding role in the Pacific region have produced more distrust among the medium Pacific powers, particularly Japan, Australia, and India.²⁴ In response, Japan, Australia, and India are ramping up their defence expenditure, prioritizing more investment in modernizing their military capabilities with the possibility of armed conflict. In addition, these countries are increasingly trying to seek the support of the US to provide strategic support and security assurances. They have a shared desire for U.S. commitment to and presence in Asia-Pacific.²⁵

²² Mark Leonard, "China Is Ready for a World of Disorder," *Foreign Affairs*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-ready-world-disorder>.

²³ Sarah Tzinieris, Rishika Chauhan, and Eirini Athanasiadou, "India's A La Carte Minilateralism: AUKUS and the Quad," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2285540>.

²⁴ Aurelio Insisa and Giulio Pugliese, "The Free and Open Indo-Pacific versus the Belt and Road: Spheres of Influence and Sino-Japanese Relations," *The Pacific Review* 35, no. 3 (May 20, 2022): 557–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/>

²⁵ Yoichiro Sato, "Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Jointly Cultivating the Trust of the Community," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 35, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 152–72, <https://doi.org/10.3200/AAFS.35.3.152-172>.

US Allies' Narratives

Australia's Indo-Pacific narrative of a 'stable' and 'rules-based' regional order celebrates the US leadership role. It considers the US essential for the region's strategic stability since the post-WWII period²⁶ as the US has nurtured the norms and principles that have supported economic growth, fostered prosperity, and maintained greater security [in Asia]. For Australia, the Indo-Pacific region offers enormous economic opportunities but also poses challenges owing to China's remarkable economic and military rise, and the emergence of other important regional actors such as India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, and the wider ASEAN community. Australia considers the ASEAN's role as central to maintaining the rule-based regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific. But simultaneously Australia seeks to keep the US not only fully engaged in the region but also aspires it to be leading the regional order and therefore the maintaining of a long-standing status quo. Overall, Australia's narrative views the persistence of the US dominance in the Indo-Pacific as 'the bedrock for strategic stability in the region, and in turn for Australia's own security.'²⁷ For Australia, the region's peace and stability are increasingly threatened mostly due to their perception of Chinese military's so-called assertive behaviour. So, it necessitates the US's continuous dominant presence. On the other hand, China's rise has little to do with its military modernization but rather through connectivity projects, like BRI.

Its 'vision' of the Indo-Pacific also promotes a 'stable, prosperous and secure' region 'underpinned by the rules-based order' that is 'open', 'inclusive' and 'free of coercion.'²⁸ It emphasizes making the Indo-Pacific region an 'open market [that] facilitates the free flow of trade, of capital and of ideas,' where 'economic and security ties are being continually strengthened.'

Numerous semiotic and non-semiotic factors have been driving Australia's Indo-Pacific narrative. Since the mid to late 2000s the term 'Indo-Pacific' in place of 'Asia-Pacific' gained traction amongst Australia's strategic narratives. Australia's heightened concerns about China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean and its implication for Australia's regional actors' relationships particularly with Japan, India, Indonesia, and other South East Asian nations are critical factors shaping its contemporary pacific perspective.

²⁶ Reynolds Linda, "Speech at 18th Asia Security Summit, IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2019," (Defence Ministers, 2019), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/speeches/2019-06-02/shangri-la-dialogue-2019>.

²⁷ Monika Barthwal-Datta and Priya Chacko, "The Politics of Strategic Narratives of Regional Order in the Indo-Pacific: Free, Open, Prosperous, Inclusive?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 244–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1744517>.

²⁸ Christopher Pyne, "Keynote Address: Australian Business Defence Industry Sovereignty Forum," (speech, Defence Ministers, July 27, 2017), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/speeches/2017-07-27/keynote-address-australian-business-defence-industry-sovereignty-forum>.

What Shapes China's Asia Pacific Narrative?

China's peaceful rise goes hand in hand with its core principles of diplomacy, focusing on the respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs of states, and opposition to both 'unilateral' sanctions and 'bloc confrontation'. In February 2023, the Chinese government published a detailed concept paper entitled The Global Security Initiative (GSI). The paper was an extension and practical manifestation of Chinese President Xi Jinping's keynote speech delivered the previous year at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference. The main overarching concept behind the speech was that 'security is the precondition for development.' President also quoted a Chinese axiom stating that 'stability brings a country prosperity and while instability leads a country to poverty'. In order to achieve prosperity, therefore, the paper advanced the idea of cooperation via trade among states. The GSI offers six core principles and twenty priorities for cooperation to enhance connectivity and trade for mutual prosperity and development.²⁹ Under GSI, China puts its weight behind the diplomatic solutions to political problems rather than taking sides in regional conflicts, like it stunned the entire world in 2023 through its successful rapprochement efforts between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the aftermath of the diplomatic breakthrough, Wang Yi, the most senior foreign affairs official of Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) had declared that it was a practical application of China's GSI. China's 12-point 'position paper' (also called a 'peace plan') on resolving the Ukraine conflict was also influenced by the principles enshrined under GSI. Similarly, China-backed GSI's twin, the Global Development Initiative, or GDI, is also guided by its Marxist belief that 'security is a prerequisite for development, and development is a guarantee for security,' or 'peace through development.' As a part of a broader framework, China introduced the Global Civilization Initiative, or GCI, which advances the concept of a state-focused and state-defined values system. These initiatives are the guiding principles portraying the Chinese diplomatic approach to regional issues, standing in striking contrast to the ones adopted by the US. The GSI, GDI, and GCI underline China's unique soft power approach to provide an alternative discourse to the west-dominated global governance agenda, economic development, and human values.

China's diplomatic approach in the Asia Pacific is influenced but by the principles mentioned above. China takes its 'One China' policy as a guiding principle interpreting the intentions of other actors toward Beijing in the

²⁹ Muhammad Ali Baig, "China's Global Security Initiative (GSI): An Explainer," Islamabad Strategic Studies Institute, November 30 2023, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IB_Ali_Baig_Nov_30_2023.pdf

region.³⁰ The One China principle, upheld by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), asserts that one unified sovereign state, known as China, is governed solely by the PRC. The One China policy is pivotal in shaping and maintaining Sino-US relations.³¹ According to this principle, Taiwan is considered an integral and inseparable part of China. The United States maintains formal diplomatic relations exclusively with the People's Republic of China, acknowledging Taiwan as a province that China considers to be separated temporarily and eventually unified with the mainland.³² In 2011, Assistant Secretary of Defense of the United States Ely Ranter, in a Testimony before Congress, highlighted the strategic importance of Taiwan for the United States in the Asia Pacific. He said: "Taiwan is located at a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of US allies and partners – stretching from the Japanese archipelago down to the Philippines and into the South China Sea – that is critical to the region's security and critical to the defense of vital US interests in the Indo-Pacific."³³ China, already suspicious of US actions of cultivating security ties with Beijing's problematic neighbours, like India, Vietnam, Philippines and Japan among others, interpreted it as a hostile intention on the US part to destabilize China's periphery to slow down China's development. Thomas Fingar and David M. Lampton, writing for *The Washington Quarterly*, conclude that 'Beijing will stick with the protection package until the United States signals a willingness to live with multipolarity in Asia.'³⁴

The Western narratives increasingly project China as a revisionist force aimed to challenge international order regionally and globally. Its objectives include expanding influence, revising rules to benefit its interests, and altering aspects of the existing order that it perceives as detrimental rather than attempting a complete overhaul of the system. China holds a unique perspective on the international liberal order, seeking selective modifications while generally accepting its framework. Fu Ying, a senior Chinese diplomat, sums up the phenomenon, stating that China is 'offering its

³⁰ Chong Ja Ian, "The Many 'One Chinas': Multiple Approaches to Taiwan and China," February 9, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/02/>

³¹ Steven M. Goldstein, "Understanding the One China Policy," Brookings, accessed July 23, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-the-one-china-policy/>.

³² "What Is the 'One China' Policy?" *BBC News*, December 12, 2016, sec. China, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-38285354>.

³³ David Sacks, "Why Is Taiwan Important to the United States? | Council on Foreign Relations," June 20, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-taiwan-important-united-states>.

³⁴ Fingar and Lampton, "China's America Policy."

ideas and initiatives to improve the international order system.³⁵ Senior Chinese officials often strongly disapprove of the American presence in the Pacific and actively oppose any security alliances between the US and regional countries. It is mainly because they view the U.S. commitment to a rules-based order as a facade that allows it to exercise the privilege of great power hypocrisy, citing examples such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Washington's refusal to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).³⁶ Furthermore, Beijing has historically embraced various international frameworks while not fully endorsing all accompanying norms, especially those pertaining to liberal democracy such as human rights. China follows a multipronged strategy toward global governance: it cooperates with global institutions if they align with its foreign policy goals, otherwise it promotes alternate institutions and frameworks.³⁷

Owing to increased US interest in Asia Pacific, ties between Beijing and Washington have become presently tenuous and more complex than they have ever been in the past. The post-1972 Sino-American ties were comparatively peaceful, marked by a mutual desire for coexistence and careful management of dangers. That era of 'constructive engagement'³⁸ based on shared cultural, economic, and strategic gains has been transformed into a relationship of mutual suspicion, leading to the lack or even absence of cooperation between the world's two largest economies.³⁹ Two major political developments, the ascension of Xi Jinping in China in 2012, which was followed by the arrival of Donald Trump in the US in 2017, have caused the bilateral ties to nosedive unprecedentedly by damaging any chances of cooperation beyond repair.⁴⁰ The Biden administration's National Security Strategy of 2022 mentioned China as a rival that 'harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit, even as the United States remains committed to managing the competition between our countries

³⁵ Mira Rapp-Hooper, Michael S. Chase, and Yuichi Hosoya, "Responding to China's Complicated Views on International Order," October 10, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2019/10>

³⁶ Rapp-Hooper, S. Chase, and Hosoya.

³⁷ "Trace China's Rise to Power," accessed August 3, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/china-global-governance/>.

³⁸ "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," accessed August 3, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

³⁹ Quansheng Zhao, "America's Response to the Rise of China and Sino-US Relations," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 2 (December 1, 2005): 1-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185370508434256>.

⁴⁰ Evan S. Medeiros, "The Changing Fundamentals of US-China Relations," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 93-119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1666355>.

responsibly.⁴¹ This phenomenon has far-reaching global implications, that in addition to hurting interests of both the US and China, may disrupt international efforts to address global challenges. It is, therefore, important to take an appraisal of factors that shape Chinese narratives. It is also important to note that since the US elections are just around the corner and the former Republican president Donald Trump rallying against his democratic counterparts for the presidential slot, there is likelihood that trade war between the both states would sharpen and the contestation in the Asia Pacific would increase.

China's primary national ambitions have remained constant throughout its history, starting from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) to the present ruling communist leadership of Xi Jinping. These goals are the struggle for achieving 'prosperity and security' through maintaining domestic peace, increasing economic development and building an impregnable army. However, what presently diminishes the prospects of mutual cooperation and engagement between the US and China is due to the role US policy of Chinese characterization. The US failure to understand China's party-state system and equating it with an autocracy, blaming Xi Jinping for Beijing's foreign and domestic policies without considering other factors affecting policymaking decisions in contemporary Chinese political structure, and drawing a picture of China as a 'rising power' or 'great power' allegedly bent on replacing the US-led international order among others are shaping China's narrative.

Throughout China's long history, two major policy approaches are interchangeably deployed to either prioritize national and regime security or to bolster economic and social development, and the former largely taking precedent over the latter. In almost all the strategic documents issued by both the Trump and Biden administrations, China is presented as a 'persistent' threat to not only American interests and values but to International liberal order, something Beijing interprets as the US-designed efforts to weaken the regime and thwart China's rise.⁴² Joe Biden expanded the contest by framing the US-China rivalry as an epic struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.⁴³ These US geopolitical grand narratives rationalized by the Chinese leadership as a foreign effort to weaken their national security and

⁴¹ The White House, "FACT SHEET: The Biden-Harris Administration's National Security Strategy," The White House, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

⁴² Cliff Kupchan, "Bipolarity Is Back: Why It Matters," *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 123-39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.2020457>.

⁴³ Seth Schindler et al., "The Second Cold War: US-China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks," *Geopolitics* 29, no. 4 (August 7, 2024): 1083-1120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2253432>.

erode the Party's legitimacy compelled Beijing to put maximum effort into ensuring their survival even if they were to compromise their economic development during the strategic journey.

Beijing views Washington's actions, like Secretary of State Clinton's remarks on maritime claims at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" in 2011, US efforts to revive and strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific, the presence of NATO and security coalitions the US is forming with similar nations in the region, and Washington's extensive history of regime changes through 'peaceful evolution'— as detrimental to its internal stability and regime security. The Communist leadership in China is significantly concerned that continuing on the path of reform for integration into the US-led global order, particularly its framework of freedom of navigation in the Asia Pacific, may ultimately undermine Chinese interests in the Asia Pacific region and the South China Sea.⁴⁴ They fear that these reforms could lead to a dilution of China's influence and control in these strategic areas, thereby threatening their long-term geopolitical goals. Such a scenario is perceived as a direct threat to China's national security, as it could result in increased foreign presence and opposition to China's territorial claims. Consequently, the leadership worries that these dynamics could destabilize the region and weaken China's strategic position, compromising their national security interests.

There is no crystal clear Chinese indigenously-generated narrative on the US, but an 'eclipsed' version of Chinese strategic narrative is interpreted through the lens of Western narratives. Various Chinese foreign policy contours with direct bearing on domestic discourse can present a partial, if not full, reflection of Chinese foreign narratives. Unlike the US, where heterogeneous political discourses are often flouted out to the world, and foreign policy decisions are reversed in no time, the Chinese officials show great homogeneity while releasing official discourses, intended to demonstrate 'political unity' of its leadership. Second, there is a long-term projection and validity of strategic narratives with little change over the past decades, like since the time of Zhou Enlai, China has continued to practice the diplomatic policy of 'mutual respect' between two opposing actors and 'abstention from interference' in the internal affairs of other countries. Likewise, China's support and unflinching solidarity for the global South against hegemon-ism and neo-colonialism for the last seven decades presents a detailed glimpse into its strategic discourse. Then, Chinese inclusiveness, both in terms of economy and civilization, seen through its policies of connectivity through BRI and other developmental projects, help explain its long-term strategic narratives.

⁴⁴ Sun Zhe, "Building a Security Community in Asia-Pacific Region: Can China Contribute?" *American Foreign Policy Interests* 37, no. 5-6 (September 3, 2015): 279-87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920.2015.1162066>.

Rival Visions: Competing US and China Strategic Narratives Shaping the Global order and Future of Asia Pacific

The US policymakers perceive China's rise, particularly in the Asia Pacific region, as one of the most serious challenges to the International Liberal Order (ILO). For more than 70 years now, the 'San Francisco System' of American bilateral alliances has remained intact despite a prominent theoretical framework of international relations anticipating that an alliance system weakens over time if the original threat initiating such an alliance disappears.⁴⁵ Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's assimilation into liberal market reforms under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the US maintained its net of security partnerships in the region. Of the three core principles identified by Clinton to manage Washington's Asia-Pacific alliance system, the third one about assuring that 'the defense capabilities and communications infrastructure of each alliance are operationally and materially capable of deterring provocation from the full spectrum of state and non-state actors' raise Beijing's eyebrows. In multiple Annual Threat Assessment Reports, the US intelligence community has repeatedly highlighted China and North Korea as posing a 'renewed threat of nation-state aggression' in the Asia Pacific region. Its 2022 Annual Threat Assessment Report states that 'China increasingly is a near-peer competitor, challenging the United States in multiple arenas – especially economically, militarily, and technologically – and it is pushing to change global norms and potentially threatening its neighbours.'⁴⁶ The Pacific Deterrence Initiative of the US in a bid to 'add more military hardware to the Indo-Pacific area and work more closely with partners and allies' calls for new deployment of ground-based-missiles, new fuelling and maintenance facilities, and more funding for equipment and training of regional allies in the Asia Pacific. China interprets the American behaviour of extending reassurances to its Asia-Pacific security partners as a renewed US effort to maintain a 'favorable regional balance of power' through the containment of China. Perceiving American designs as an existential security threat, Beijing tries to counter them through developing its own strategic global narrative. Accordingly, US reassurances to its partners are not merely about supporting allies but are also about ensuring that US strategic interests are preserved by curbing China's rise and maintaining a check on its regional ambitions.

China has been doubling down on enhancing bilateral ties and cooperation with Russia. It is concerning for the US and its allies because, both

⁴⁵ Dan Reiter, "Learning, Realism, and Alliances: The Weight of the Shadow of the Past," *World Politics* 46, no. 4 (1994): 490–526, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2950716>.

⁴⁶ Julian E. Barnes, "China Poses Biggest Threat to U.S., Intelligence Report Says," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/politics/china-national-security-intelligence-report.html>.

states hold permanent member votes on the UN Security Council. In the aftermath of the eruption of the Ukrainian war, bilateral ties between the two have grown to an unprecedented level.⁴⁷ In early 2022, Beijing abstained from voting on a United Nations Security Resolution condemning Russia and has been at loggerheads with the US and Europe over the question of imposition of sanctions on Russia.⁴⁸ China did not take an overt neutral position on the Ukrainian war but made efforts to maintain its distance from Russia while presenting its strategic narrative against the backdrop of the US/West-Russian rivalry. It projects itself as an equidistant player belonging to the broader international community as well as the most appropriate actor to manage a peaceful global order. Beijing is also spearheading a movement leading the Global South through platforms, like BRICS, SCO, and BRI. This has, little by little, distraught the US-led liberal world order despite Beijing ruling out any such possibility.

China has been capitalizing on Washington's disjointed economic policies in Asia and enhancing economic cooperation in the region, respectively. Under the Obama administration, for example, the US and eleven states in the Pacific Rim proposed a free-trade agreement, known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), aimed at closer cooperation in the Asia Pacific through 'lower tariffs, while also serving as a buttress against China's growing regional influence.'⁴⁹ The Trump administration, however, reneged on the agreement and parted ways with it in January 2017. The remaining 11 countries the coming year in March 2018 renegotiated the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).⁵⁰ The present Biden administration has still not been able to rejuvenate the agreement, which has resulted in the confidence of regional allies in US credibility badly dented. In September 2021, China applied through an application to join the agreement, which shows Beijing's commitment to forging ties with neighbours to offset any foreign influence. In November 2020, members of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and regional partners signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

⁴⁷ Angela Pennisi di Floristella and Xuechen Chen, "Strategic Narratives of Russia's War in Ukraine: Perspectives from China," *Policy Studies* 45, no. 3-4 (May 3, 2024): 573-94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2023.2276116>.

⁴⁸ Rebekka Åsnes Sagild and Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "Chinese Re-Examinations of Russia? The Strategic Partnership in the Wake of Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Journal of Contemporary China*: 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2358876>.

⁴⁹ Kevin Granville, "What Is TPP? Behind the Trade Deal That Died," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2016, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/business/tpp-explained-what-is-trans-pacific-partnership.html>.

⁵⁰ Kevin Chen, "The Case for a US Digital Trade Deal in IPEF – and Why It's an Uphill Battle," *The Diplomat*, June 5, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/>.

Interestingly, the Brookings Institution reports that between CPTPP and RCEP, there are two significant trade deals in Asia of which the US is absent, despite the fact that nearly '42,000 U.S. companies export to the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, supporting about 600,000 U.S. jobs.' China joined RCEP in 2020 and has been the largest trading partner of ASEAN, a position it has retained since 2009.⁵¹ The annual bilateral trade between China and Russia has increased to \$240 billion.⁵² Likewise, China is North Korea's largest trading partner, while its annual trade with India also stands at \$118.4 billion in 2023-24.⁵³

As China is modernizing militarily, its strategic objective remains to contain foreign interventions in its near seas. To secure its near seas from foreign interventions, particularly from the US, it is focusing more on enhancing its military and technological capabilities to 'counter intervention or conduct regional military exercises.'⁵⁴ To secure the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Yellow Sea, it has developed Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) weapons.⁵⁵ These weapons include 'ground and air-launched cruise missiles, short and medium-range ballistic missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, advanced fighter aircraft, air refuelling capabilities, and integrated defence systems.' China's top priority is to contain and deter US intervention in the Taiwan Strait conflict. China's military exercises and oil drills in the region have been a source of contention with regional countries including Australia, which look at the US for countering the perceived China's threat.

Despite its geographical distance from China, Australia plays a pivotal role in the Asia-Pacific strategy of the United States, serving as a key ally and partner in maintaining regional stability and security.⁵⁶ While Australia supports US initiatives aimed at countering China's expanding influence in the region, it also engages robustly in economic activities with China, being its largest trading partner. In this context, the relationship between Beijing and Canberra is often characterized as 'frenemies,' as both nations maintain trade and diplomatic connections despite ongoing geopolitical tensions.⁵⁷

⁵¹ "Updating America's Asia Strategy | Brookings," accessed July 24, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/updating-americas-asia-strategy/>.

⁵² Alexandra Prokopenko, "What Are the Limits to Russia's 'Yuanization'?" May 27, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/>.

⁵³ Maria Siow, "India-China Trade Just Keeps Growing. New Delhi Would Rather It Didn't," *South China Morning Post*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3264341/>.

⁵⁴ Han Noy, "China Hosts Military Exercises With 5 ASEAN Members," *Voice of America*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/>

⁵⁵ Ngo Minh Tri, "China's A2/AD Challenge in the South China Sea: Securing the Air From the Ground," May 19, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/>

⁵⁶ Steven Ratuva, "A New Regional Cold War? American and Chinese Posturing in the Pacific," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 409–22.

⁵⁷ Nick Marsh, "China and Australia: Frenemies Who Need Each Other," *RNZ*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/world/501692/>

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's last year visit to China was the first by an Australian leader in seven years. His three-day trip followed a period of deteriorating relations, exacerbated by Canberra's strengthening military alliance with Washington. In the recent years, there have been mutual accusations of human rights abuses and national security concerns, leading to increasingly negative public perceptions of each other. During the peak of their trade relationship in 2020, nearly half of Australia's exports were destined for China. In contrast, around that time, approximately 9% of all exports from the United States and only 5% from the United Kingdom were directed to China. Australia's significant economic dependence on China helps prevent further deterioration in bilateral relations. Yet, Chinese foreign policy experts are aware that Australia's strong political and military alliance with the US ensures its alignment with America in the global power rivalry.⁵⁸ Professor Jane Golley, an economist at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, warns of the risk that Australia and China could shift from cooperation to competition, especially in crucial areas like combating climate change. Australian scholars know that aligning with the US, a nation whose economic strategies directly undermine China's interests, may exacerbate tensions and potentially reset their bilateral relations to an earlier stage. Amid escalated tensions with the US, China is cautious about not estranging America's allies. This caution stems from Washington's efforts to restrict China's access to essential technologies like advanced computer chips and critical minerals vital for green energy, extending its influence to pressure allied nations to follow suit. China, too, is heavily dependent on Australian natural resources for maintaining its economic growth; for instance, Australia holds fifty percent of the world's lithium reserves. This resource is coveted by Chinese firms seeking access to essential metals necessary for manufacturing electric vehicles, an industry where China currently leads globally. Cooperation between these two states is crucial for fostering peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. However, Australia and other Pacific countries alignment with the US in its strategic narrative underscores a commitment to a rules-based international order, but this alignment is also heightening tensions with China. China is projected as a power intent on revising the existing rules-based order, thereby blaming it for disrupting the status quo maintained by the United States and its allies. Though, this narrative is leading to increased geopolitical friction, and more polarised Asia-Pacific region, impelling China to respond with more conflicting strategic narrative.

⁵⁸ James Laurenceson, "Australia's Approach to Chinese Power and Managing Relations with Beijing: The Enduring Paradigm of Liberalism," *Journal of Contemporary China*: 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2365240>.

Conclusion

The conflicting nature of the US and China narratives on the Asia-Pacific region underscores a profound geopolitical struggle for dominance and influence. While the US and its allies depict China as an autocratic power seeking to revise the rules-based order and disrupt regional stability, China counters with its own strategic narrative that emphasizes its capacity and right to shape the international order in the Asia-Pacific. The Chinese narrative, though not explicit and pronounced, aims to promote cooperation through connectivity and trade. This narrative is markedly different from the US's narrative of Chinese containment through development of military alliances in the region, but is underlined by a consistency in Chinese foreign policy discourse for decades against hegemonism and neo-colonialism through mutual respect and non-interference in the issues of other states. This clash of perspectives not only highlights the deepening tension between the two powers but also signifies the broader contest for the future direction of regional and global governance. The outcome of this narrative battle will have far-reaching implications for the stability, security, and economic dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

