



Conclusion:

Why We Need Common Security in the Indo-Pacific

ANURADHA CHENOY & JOSEPH GERSON

Escalating Danger

All strategic indicators point towards a global confrontation in the Indo-Pacific. This region is bordered by six nuclear powers (the United States, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea) – with China and the U.S. confronting each other militarily, both over Taiwan and in the South China Sea.

Under the Biden administration, the U.S. has built up a lattice of military alliances designed to contain China. Seeking to create a buffer region analogous to that defined by the U.S. Monroe Doctrine in 1823, China has both declared and asserted its sovereignty via its “nine-dash line,” claiming more than 90% of the South China Sea. Russia, caught in a confrontation with the U.S. in Ukraine, has established a comprehensive strategic partnership with China as part of a Russian-Chinese-North Korean entente. Russia has stitched a military alliance with North Korea that asserts Russian interests in the region. Riddled with hundreds of U.S. military bases and installations, this region contains several inter-state and intrastate conflicts that are frozen or unresolved; these are susceptible to external interventions, which when fused with the great power competition may erupt into dangerous military conflagration.

The Indo-Pacific region is in need of a security paradigm shift away from confrontational competition; common security is both an obvious and a viable alternative.

In 2011, the U.S. administration announced a “pivot to Asia” policy and a ‘rebalancing’ with the intention to maintain U.S. hegemony by restraining China.¹ This process, accelerated under President Trump in 2017, was intended to show the indivisibility of U.S. and NATO security interests across the Pacific and Indian oceans, and reframed the region as the “Indo-Pacific.” With the Ukraine war in 2022 and a policy of dual containment (of Russia and China), the U.S. revitalized an interlocking network of military alliances in the region, involving its allies in this great power competition and exerting itself to maintain American primacy.

Hot Spots

Several locations in the Indo-Pacific warrant special concern and attention:

- Taiwan, which China insists on reclaiming as its integral province; China considers this reunification non-negotiable, while the U.S. seeks to protect, or at least encourage, Taiwan’s de facto independence.
- The Korean Peninsula, which remains divided — with hostility between the North and South and no peace treaty more than 70 years after the Armistice Agreement.

- The geostrategically vital South China and West Philippine seas; the Philippines, whose territorial waters are being contested by China, having deepened its alliances with the U.S. and Japan as part of those nations' containment strategies.
- Frozen and unresolved India vs. China tensions and the related India-Pakistan border hostility.

Taiwan

As of this writing, the most volatile situation in the region is the competition over the future of Taiwan. The province was separated from mainland China in 1895 and ruled by Tokyo as a colony, as a consequence of the first Sino-Japanese war. The severance was perpetuated with the Chinese nationalists' defeat in China's civil war, and Taiwan became a de facto U.S. protectorate. Beijing has long been resolved to reclaim Taiwan as a Chinese province — preferably by peaceful means, but militarily if Taipei takes irreversible steps toward full independence. In the 1970s, when the U.S. and China normalized their relations, and at a time when the Nationalist government in Taiwan still claimed to be the legitimate rulers of all of China, the U.S. and China agreed to the “One China Policy.” However, the U.S. Congress then immediately adopted the Taiwan Relations Act, which reinforced the U.S. protectorate role.

In recent decades these tensions have become further complicated by the development of democratic culture and the growing identity of many in Taiwan, especially younger people, as Taiwanese rather than Chinese. In violation of the normalization agreement with China, the U.S. has increased its sales of advanced weapons to Taiwan, and U.S., Chinese, Japanese, and European naval and air forces have all engaged in provocative military maneuvers in which a single incident, accident, or miscalculation carries the possibility of triggering massive military escalation.

North and South Korea

The Korean peninsula is another high-risk, high-stakes area. It has now been 71 years since the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed, yet this area remains one of the most militarized and dangerous places on earth. More than a million heavily armed South Korean and North Korean forces face one another across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Both sides, as well as the U.S. and Japan, have engaged in provocative military actions. North Korea developed a deterrent nuclear arsenal in response to numerous U.S. threats, preparations, exercises, and explicit threats to initiate nuclear attacks. In 2023, facing the risk that South Korea might develop its own nuclear arsenal to counter that of its northern neighbor, the Washington Declaration provided guarantees of U.S. extended deterrence, and since then the U.S. has dispatched “nuclear assets,” including a nuclear-armed warship, to South Korea and its surrounding waters.

The South Korean and U.S. militaries have also conducted numerous and massive “decapitation” and regime change military exercises, and in 2023 and 2024 Presidents Biden and Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida consolidated their tripartite alliance. North Korean agents have infiltrated South Korea, and North Korea has dug tunnels under the DMZ; challenged South Korean naval forces militarily at their contested maritime border; and, by revising its constitution, reaffirmed its status as a nuclear weapons state. Its missile and nuclear weapons tests have violated United Nations resolutions.

In 2024, North Korea's Supreme Leader appeared to rule out reunification with the South, saying that South Korea is just another foreign state and ending decades of intra-Korean diplomacy. This change opens the door to either diplomatic normalization or po-

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tential conflict. North Korea and Russia have recently signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that talks of mutual security guarantees in the event of an attack. This increases threat perceptions in the region.

The South China Sea

Bordered by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei, the South China Sea is perhaps the world's most strategically vital waterway. Its waves lap China's southern and eastern coasts; since the Opium Wars, military threats to China have primarily come from the sea. Roughly one-third of world trade, including fuel oil from the Middle East, transits the sea, making it essential to Chinese and other East Asian economies, and one of the most valuable prizes in the U.S.-Chinese cold war.² Since the end of World War II, the Sea has been dominated by the U.S. Seventh Fleet.

Recently, China's maritime incursions have become bolder and more frequent. Since the 2000s, China has laid claim to about 90% of the South China Sea, including significant sections of the Exclusive Economic Zones of five Southeast Asian states: Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. China does not recognize the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ruling in favor of the Philippines' claims to the Scarborough Shoal, which the Chinese forcibly overtook. Instead, the Chinese in response are rapidly militarizing islands on their maritime borders and beyond — both to ward off possible U.S. attacks and to pursue wider regional ambitions. The Philippines is caught in the crossfire of U.S. and China hostile activity in the South China Seas, while the rest of ASEAN does not want to be drawn into a regional confrontation that is not in their interest.

Since 1898, U.S. military bases in the Philippines have served as jumping off points for U.S. wars and military operations across the region. In 2022, Washington announced plans for more military bases to add to the existing five, and in 2024 committed to deploying medium-range missiles in the northern Philippines capable of reaching coastal Chinese cities. United States and allied "Freedom of the Seas" forays, as well as U.S. and Chinese provocative operations in these waters, increase the dangers of unintended conflict.

Such confrontations are backed by new security formations like the QUAD and AUKUS alliances that bring NATO partners like Australia into arrangements that are seen as steps towards the containment of

China. The PRC views U.S. security alliances in the Indo-Pacific as assertions of U.S. hegemony, threats to Chinese interests, and instigations of international instability. In reaction, China is forging comprehensive strategic relations with Pacific nations like Fiji and the Solomon Islands, with which it signed a security cooperation agreement in 2022. Russia is concentrating on developing its easternmost territory and the port of Vladivostok on the Pacific, undertaking many collaborations with the Chinese and others.

India

India has unresolved border problems with both Pakistan and China — and all three of these nations are nuclear powers. Pakistan is a strategic partner of both China and the U.S., while India has a long and unwavering strategic partnership with Russia. The U.S., which supported Pakistan against India in the 1970s, seeks to balance the two, and has tried to pull India into a closer strategic alliance; however, India so far remains committed to strategic autonomy and to a multi-vector policy of engaging with all and resolving foreign policy issues bilaterally. India and China are engaged in continuous commander-level talks on their border issues, with sporadic but minor standoffs. Nevertheless, the border demarcation remains contentious.

The Small States Factor

Attuned to today's global transition toward a multipolar international system, the many smaller states in the Indo-Pacific region see an opportunity. These countries view regional alliances, bodies like ASEAN, and forums like BRICS and the G-20 as a protective and collective shield. Further, small states find the opportunity to amplify their voices in the international system through such entities. Small states can be considered natural generators of smart power, and have contributed to important institutions for peace like the International Criminal Court, the Arms Trade Treaty, and the conclusion and entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Putting Survival First

Common Security in the Indo-Pacific Region points the way to an offramp from the escalation taking place in the Indo-Pacific. Under the shadow of warships, war-

planes, and weaponized technologies being wielded in the name of the U.S.-China “security dilemma” — tools that make the daily confrontations occurring in regional hot spots extraordinarily dangerous — we call for regional common security, specifically in North-east Asia and more broadly in the Indo-Pacific region as a whole. *These essays explain the need for collaborative de-escalation.* We call for a moratorium on further nuclear and conventional and maritime one-upmanship, an immediate return to diplomacy, and a serious engagement on global disarmament. All regional actors must play a role in this deescalation. These governments urgently need to engage in comprehensive risk assessments and involve regional bodies in decision-making.

The real crises are those of climate change, irreversible environmental degradation, and omniscidal nuclear war. Wars and militarization only exacerbate these existential threats. Many indebted countries and a large portion of the world’s poorest people live in the Indo-Pacific; conflict and an embittered competitive polarization draw them into further impoverishment and debt, and destabilize a region struggling for development. It is critical to recognize how the serious military crises in Northeast Asia and the South China Sea could drag the Indo-Pacific into a spiral of arms races and militarization while deprioritizing development and peace. To counter this danger, we need to promote active, life-affirming common security dialogue; diplomatic engagement; reignited nuclear disarmament talks; and mechanisms to monitor and control military budgets.

The Indo-Pacific is home to diverse peoples, resources, sea lanes, delicate ecologies, and a layered history; these must not be reduced to chess pieces in the game of geopolitics. Countries in the region that have remained out of the orbit of ‘great power politics,’ eschewed military alliances, and opted for neutrality

— such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam — have retained elements of social cohesion and diversity within their societies and made great steps towards development and security. Such countries practice a form of common security in the region as well as some elements of human security domestically.

Common security for the Indo-Pacific calls for further development and regionalization of common security as outlined in *Common Security 2022: For Our Shared Future and Policies for Common Security*, offering viable alternatives to the threat of mutual destruction and focusing instead on our joint survival.³⁴ Small states have found ways to support this vision, as have many regional organizations such as ASEAN, the SCO, Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) countries, and others. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which is once again gathering force in the Global South, advocates neutrality and staying independent of military blocs, and is popular with most countries of the Indo-Pacific. NAM shares a vision of common security; it supports independent and sovereign foreign policy for its members and is actively fostering multipolarity.

Common security can be thought of as inclusive security. This framework strengthens the architecture of peace and security; is linked to disarmament; intersects with human security; supports the U.N. Women, Peace and Security Agenda; is grounded in tolerance, anti-racism, pluralism, and co-existence; and promotes shared prosperity. In this interconnected world, states need to consider a shift away from their hard security paradigms in favor of common security and common solutions. Including individual states in the nuclear-weapon-free zone regime would ensure that there would not be blind spots or grey areas in the nuclear-weapon-free world we are working to establish, but that these nations would instead be important building blocks thereof.

Endnotes

1. Eckert, P. (2011, November 11). Clinton declares “America’s Pacific century”. *Reuters*.
2. Center for Strategic & International Studies (2021, January 25). How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea? CSIS China Power Project.
3. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (1983). *Policies for Common Security*. Taylor & Francis.
4. Olof Palme International Center, International Peace Bureau, & International Trade Union Confederation (2022). *Common Security 2022: For Our Shared Future*. Olof Palme International Center, International Peace Bureau, & International Trade Union Confederation.