

# Stability in Maritime Asia

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What kept the peace in maritime Asia in the last three decades that enabled unprecedented prosperity? And would it still work in today's situation?

The answer to those questions could suggest how we might look at cooperative security in the Indo-Pacific. While several logical answers are possible, to my mind, the (limited) hub-and-spokes security architecture based on the U.S.—that had no challengers from the end of the Cold War through the unipolar nineties and early noughts—is still a major contributor to the peace of maritime Asia, but not on the continent. The balance of power that sustained it has changed, as has the balance of terror that obtains in the most heavily nuclearized continent on earth, Asia.

Today both balances continue to shift rapidly. Unlike Europe, it has been quite some time since there was an identifiable order in Asia. And the elements of order are breaking down.

Nuclear weapons programs are being upgraded in quantity and quality, and proliferation is increasingly likely at both ends of the Asian continent. China is pushing hard to try and nullify the U.S. alliance system, reacting strongly even to the innocuous idea of a NATO office in Japan. There is a continuous belt of weapons of mass destruction right across Asia, from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, from Israel to North Korea. There is an additional risk that states believe Russian propaganda that Russia's nuclear weapon threats deterred the U.S. and NATO from intervening directly in Ukraine.

The oceans are indeed linked and the region's prosperity and accumulation of power are dependent on the maritime space that is best described as the Indo-Pacific—hence China's attempt to become a maritime power for the first time in its history and to have a decisive say in the region. Maritime Asia is the arena where China-U.S. contention plays out. That contention adds sharpness and consequence to the ring of disputes and hotspots around China in maritime Asia, from the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, through Taiwan, to the South China Sea, to the India-China border, and so on. However, the geography and security situations differ from one part of the Indo-Pacific to the other. The western Pacific is an open geographic area dominated by the U.S.; the seas near China are closed and contested seas, and have been battle spaces throughout history; and the Indian Ocean is an open geographical space and has therefore always been an ocean of trade and travel and not a battle space, even during the World Wars. Geography creates different security situations across maritime Asia. Risks, actions, and outcomes, therefore, differ markedly from one part of the Indo-Pacific to the other.

The region is also fragmented in terms of the security architecture and institutions.

The U.S. is today more integrated into Asia's security and works with many more partners than, say, ten years ago. China basically respects U.S. sanctions on Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, China is pushing into empty spaces (such as the South Pacific, southern Africa, and Indian Ocean island states) and new domains, and trying to convert economic influence into political power, which it is finding difficult to achieve as it has elected to do so on its own without allies.

A significant source of instability is China's rise and behavior, as India experienced in spring 2020 on the border. Much will depend on China's internal trajectory. History tells us that authoritarian stability and predictability is an illusion. China may now be undergoing the economic readjustment that other miracle East Asian economies like Japan, Korea, and Taiwan did after 30 to 40 years of spectacular growth. In each other case, this was more painful than anticipated and was accompanied by a renegotiation of the political and social contract. Only time will tell how this will go in China and whether the beleaguered mentality that China now displays will result in a doubling down on its behavior abroad.

The other source of instability in Asia is the diffusion of weapons of mass destruction and conventional offensive weapons. These weapons may have helped to keep the peace until recently. But there is little to suggest that without building credible structures of deterrence in northeast Asia and in west Asia, North Korea's nuclear quests will not provoke similar ambitions in South Korea and Japan, nor will Iran's in neighbor states like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE.

While the U.S. and China are both overwhelmingly preponderant in military and economic terms over all other powers, they are both also challenged in some theaters and domains. Power has been diffused and technology and weapons are more widely held and understood, opening up new domains for contention. As U.S.-China tensions have risen, so have military budgets through the Asia-Pacific. Between 2017 and 2022, military budgets adjusted for inflation grew by almost 60% in the Philippines, over 35% in China, and around 10-15% in South Korea, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Indonesia. If this is worrying in what is fast becoming the economic and geopolitical center of gravity of the world, we must find better ways of keeping the peace, managing crises and differences, and mitigating the effects of great power rivalry on Asia's future prosperity. Undersea contention in the Indian Ocean is now a reality that countries like India and the U.S. have to deal with.

The response to the shifts in the balance of power has been predictable: strengthening existing alliances and partnerships to balance China while there is some hedging against potential changes in both Chinese and U.S. policy. This is not a situation that promotes new alliances or Asia-wide security structures and architectures. There is no common threat to internal order that would lead to a new alliance or partnership (as the French Revolution led to the Concert of Europe, or communist insurgencies led to the formation of ASEAN). If anything, China is offering autocrats, dictators, and new authoritarians the tools and know-how to tighten their grip on their societies. But more than the choice between the U.S. and China that other states seek to avoid making, it is the local kindling and its potential to lead to conflict.

I have argued before that issue-based coalitions of the willing and able are probably the way to go when the situation changes so rapidly and power is increasingly diffused. Open mini-laterals ready to work with like-minded partners in promoting an open and inclusive set of security arrangements in maritime Asia have a higher chance of success in today's fragmented Asia of great power rivalry. The Quad's success is proof of that, as is the success of the other plurilateral and bilateral arrangements like AUKUS and I2U2. The last few years have seen considerable progress in some areas, such as maritime security and the resilience of supply chains. But much more can and needs to be done, particularly to prepare crisis management mechanisms and to address the local sources of instability before crises hit us.

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