

Building Future Indo-Pacific Partnerships

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On the heels of a historic Japan-Republic of Korea-United States Summit at Camp David in August and the recent trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) convening, the changing dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region are tangible.¹ Russia's war in Ukraine and emerging crises in the Middle East increase the urgency to build strong coalitions of nations as a core tenet of the U.S.-led effort to shape the future of the international order.² However, can the U.S. build transformational partnerships to achieve its goals of a free and open global order? The Indo-Pacific region stands out as an area of both opportunity and challenges. Following decades of hub-and-spoke diplomacy, this paper discusses emerging alliance and partnership networks in the region, with a focus on the Japan-Republic of Korea-U.S. trilateral, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Quad (comprised of the U.S., Australia, Japan, and India). It then makes recommendations for deepening partnerships in diplomatic, military, information, and economic domains.

Despite deep rooted historic animosities between Tokyo and Seoul, both key American allies recognize the severity of twenty-first century challenges. With an increasingly assertive People's Republic of China (PRC) and unpredictable nuclear-armed North Korea, President Yoon Suk Yeol and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida demonstrate urgency in strengthening the Japan-Republic of Korea-U.S. trilateral relationship. The trilateral summit is a significant step. The announcement of a three-way secure hotline for crisis consultation marks a key outcome of the summit and a model for crisis mitigation in the region.³ In addition to increasing information sharing, the U.S., Japan, and Korea plan to hold annual military exercises and ballistic missile drills. These actions further frustrate Beijing as state-run media described the Camp David meeting as the launch of a "mini NATO" that threatens regional security and exacerbates tensions.⁴ Despite assurances from senior administration officials, the PRC sees the strengthening of relations as a move towards a new Cold War.⁵ As the largest trading partner for both Japan and South Korea, the PRC has significant economic leverage to destabilize each country's economy. Furthermore, Japanese, Korean, and U.S. administrations must contend with domestic politics and prove to their citizens that the trilateral is in their nations' best interest to build a resilient partnership. The ability to institutionalize this trilateral relationship will require political will and deeper cooperation beyond political and military channels to blunt the blow of potential economic and information coercion. This includes addressing historical and social grievances in reconciling Japan's colonial past and wartime actions. Civil society can also bolster Japan-Republic of Korea relations through exchanges and dialogues among academic, non-governmental, religious, cultural, and economic groups.

In comparison, U.S. relations with ASEAN countries and South Asia remain less defined and historically underdeveloped. The PRC views Southeast Asia as its "backyard" and advances a narrative of a "shared home and shared destiny" to attempt to undermine U.S. presence, which Beijing brands as external influence.⁶ Unlike Beijing, the U.S. has historic relationships and treaties with Thailand and the Philippines, as well as a Strategic Framework Agreement with Singapore. However, the PRC's use of ports and naval bases in Cambodia and Sri Lanka, and recent military drills with Singapore and in the Western Indian Ocean lead to concerns over the PRC's expanding military footprint.⁷ In addition, the PRC's involvement in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership free trade agreement bolsters its status as the region's largest trading partner, even with U.S. allies and partners such as Japan, India, Korea, and Australia.⁸ Despite these challenges, as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy states, ASEAN is "central to the regional architecture."⁹ The U.S. has sought to bolster its diplomatic presence with the launch of the annual U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit while also prioritizing attendance at the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum. Simultaneously, the U.S. is increasing its military presence in the region. After a long pause, Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. approved U.S. military presence at four additional sites, building on the five bases originally authorized. Likewise, a renewed rapprochement between the U.S. and Vietnam, in part due to ongoing territorial disputes with the PRC, shows

the potential fruits of sustained and multi-faceted diplomacy.¹⁰ Moreover, the U.S. military's bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises in the region (e.g., RIMPAC, Cope North) have complemented increasing funding and economic partnerships. Despite early signs of receptiveness, deeper engagement with the ASEAN region requires adequate investment, sustained representation, and respect for nations' terms of engagement. Along with a demonstrated commitment to reinforce relationships, the U.S. must advance its own compelling narrative that meets ASEAN realities and aspirations.

Finally, India presents a unique opportunity for the U.S. and its Pacific allies. As a member of the Quad, a BRICS nation, and a leader of the non-aligned movement, India is a nation with complex identities woven into its fabric. With a growing population, economy, and international influence, India is likely to maintain its leadership role in the Indian Ocean region. New Delhi also recently upgraded its strategic partnerships with both Japan and the U.S. in response to growing PRC aggression on India's land border and PRC military presence in the Indian Ocean region.¹¹

Accordingly, the Quad is steadily emerging as a promising partnership framework in the Indo-Pacific. President Joe Biden's recent attendance at the Fourth Quad Summit in Tokyo and scheduled state visits to India and Australia this fall show commitment from the highest levels of government.¹² The participation of all four Quad members in the 2023 Malabar military exercise in Australia marks a significant development. Accordingly, the Quad is aspiring to play a larger role in the region, prioritizing deeper cooperation with ASEAN nations in a variety of domains, including infrastructure development, climate change resilience, and maritime security. The Quad may become the defining partnership of the Indo-Pacific, but to realize this ambition, it must develop mechanisms for cooperation across political, military, economic, and social domains.

While all of these partnerships show potential, vulnerabilities are also evident, with the PRC's economic influence and information operations a critical factor. To confront the challenges of the twenty-first century, the U.S. will need to build resilience, advance an integrated regional network, and lay the foundations for redefining the world order based on partnerships and international cooperation.

Building Resilience

First, resilience through political change and crises will define the success of Indo-Pacific partnership frameworks. Resilience for developing Indo-Pacific nations increases agency and hardening against PRC economic coercion. To build economic resilience, the U.S. should develop mechanisms to provide immediate support to countries that face economic coercion or retaliation from the PRC. By building climate resilience, maritime security capacity, and exclusive economic zone monitoring capabilities within partner nations, smaller nations can disrupt PRC infringement and increase national sovereignty. Additionally, the U.S. can create political space by aligning its efforts with ASEAN and the African Union initiatives, legitimizing the agency and collective efforts of developing nations. Partnerships must institutionalize cooperation and diplomatic engagement through annual summits, ministerial meetings, military linkages, and humanitarian assistance disaster relief coordination. Finally, people-to-people ties cement alliances and build social momentum within partner nations.

Integrated Regional Network

Secondly, the U.S. needs to mature its whole-of-region approach and lead the creation of integrated Indo-Pacific networks. Internal to the U.S. government, the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions have been traditionally considered separate geographic areas, cutting across various combatant commands and myriad supporting bureaucracies. Inclusion of the Western Indian Ocean in the framework, clarity on command-and-control relationships, and integration across all levels of U.S. government, agencies, and commercial partners will be required to realize a coherent and effective Indo-Pacific strategy.

As the Quad institutionalizes its partnership framework, it has the potential to be the defining partnership of a flexible network. A pathway to partnership with the Quad should rapidly be developed, especially around missions like disaster response, maritime security, and digital connectivity. A demonstration of the Quad working in partnership with ASEAN, South Korea, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, the EU, and the UK can serve as a foundation for setting standards of behavior in the region. While Five Eyes and the Trilateral may serve as privileged information sharing mechanisms, cooperation within an enhanced Quad framework will provide legitimacy and build greater consensus among partner nations. In the military domain, cooperation in disaster response and maritime security can be the cornerstone of Quad-ASEAN defense cooperation. On the economic front, the U.S. should continue and expand its public-private partnerships in the region, including encouraging supply chain diversification from the PRC to regional partners, digital upskilling, and investment in emerging technologies. Additionally, the U.S. can leverage knowledge from Japan's decades of development investment in Southeast Asia, India, and Africa and work with Tokyo to build complementary infrastructure investment programs. Like Japan, the U.S. should encourage American firms to "crowd-in" following government investment, particularly in Southeast Asia. In total, these efforts to integrate the mechanisms for diplomatic, security, and economic cooperation are a foundation for a new wave of development which is essential to gain buy-in from both established and emerging nations.

Redefining the World Order through International Cooperation

Finally, Indo-Pacific cooperation can serve as a model for building a sustainable global order. The Indo-Pacific region is a heavyweight in terms of global population, economy, climate impact, and resources. No nation, region, or partnership framework can remain isolated from global crises, whether the war in Ukraine, energy and supply change crises, climate disasters, or migrant flows. The alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific can be shaped as a model for a new era, serving as a baseline for reform of the UN, UN Security Council, and global financing institutions. Alongside Japan and India, the U.S. should advocate for Global South voices in the reforms of the World Bank, IMF, and the UN to ensure legitimacy in an inclusive new global order. Furthermore, building on the historic AUKUS security pact with Australia and the UK, the U.S. is leading efforts to expand EU and NATO partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. The United States' ability to link Atlantic and Pacific alliances, especially around common concerns in the Indian Ocean region, can be the baseline to establish standards for a free and open global order.

In summary, the Indo-Pacific has the potential to transcend its geography and define a new model of global leadership. The U.S. can set the narrative by implementing a deliberate and coherent strategy across all levels of government and modes of engagement. A focus on resilience, integration, and reform implementation are the keys to maintaining democratic leadership in the twenty-first century.

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