



## Still Getting Asia Wrong: No “Contain China” Coalition Exists

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To cite this article: David C. Kang (2022) Still Getting Asia Wrong: No “Contain China” Coalition Exists, The Washington Quarterly, 45:4, 79-98, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2022.2148918](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2148918)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2148918>



Published online: 16 Dec 2022.



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## Still Getting Asia Wrong: No “Contain China” Coalition Exists

Is there an incipient East Asian containment coalition against China? Evidence leads to the conclusion that there is not. Yet for almost three decades, scholars have been claiming that the rapid growth of Chinese power is, will or should cause East Asian countries to balance against it and join a US-led containment coalition. Those claiming that East Asian states are already containing China include political scientist Michael Beckley, who writes that “China’s neighbors are arming themselves and aligning with outside powers to secure their territory and sea-lanes. Many of the world’s largest economies are collectively developing new trade, investment, and technology standards that implicitly discriminate against China.”<sup>1</sup> In 2014, scholars Adam Liff and John Ikenberry claimed that “there is already some evidence of security dilemma-driven military competition in the Asia Pacific, which could worsen significantly in the near future ... [S]ecurity dilemma dynamics appear to be important drivers of states enhancing military capabilities in the increasingly volatile Asia Pacific region.”<sup>2</sup>

Predictions of balancing against China go back as far as 1993, when political scientist Richard Betts asked, “Should we want China to get rich or not? For realists, the answer should be no, since a rich China would overturn any balance of power.”<sup>3</sup> In 2005, John Mearsheimer predicted that “China cannot rise peacefully ... Most of China’s neighbors, including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam, will likely join with the United States to contain China’s power.”<sup>4</sup>

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 45:4 pp. 79–98  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2148918>

Those claiming that East Asian states should contain China include China scholar Rush Doshi, who argues that the United States should arm countries around China with the capabilities to contain it, writing that “these efforts might focus on Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India.”<sup>5</sup> Containment is more than military balancing, and usually involves broad and stringent economic restrictions.<sup>6</sup> To that end, Princeton Professor Aaron Friedberg argues that “democracies must radically restructure their economic relations with China ... the effectiveness of restrictions on both investments and exports would be greatly enhanced if they were implemented on a multilateral basis.”<sup>7</sup>

But these claims are based more on assumptions about the world than they are on a careful empirical description of the reality of East Asia today. The evidence supporting these predictions of containment remains thin. An examination leads to the conclusion that China’s dramatic growth has provoked very little response from its neighbors. As of 2022, there is still no nascent East Asian containment coalition against China. Furthermore, rather than initiating any efforts to limit

economic interactions with China, most East Asian countries are steadily deepening their economic and diplomatic relations with China.

The explanation for why there is no containment coalition in East Asia is straightforward: most East Asian countries do not see China as a threat to their survival, and so they are not reacting as if it were. Leaders and publics in East Asia see their most pressing

**Most East Asian countries do not see China as a threat to their survival**

issues as economic or domestic, not military, and not necessarily related to China. There are residual issues pertaining to China in the region, such as maritime territorial disputes. But these do not threaten the national survival of any country, and states do not see them as worth fighting over.

So what? We are still getting Asia wrong. The scholarly and policy debate in the United States about how the United States should deal with China should begin with a careful examination of how the region is interacting with China. A key element of almost every American policy and scholarly discussion about East Asian security and China’s rise includes a claim that East Asian states already are, or inevitably will, contain China. But this claim needs to be carefully assessed, not simply asserted. Any US policy toward the region must directly deal with the fact that a coalition of anti-Chinese states is not yet emerging in East Asia.

This article first assesses the defense efforts of East Asian countries, showing that there has been little military response to China’s return to prominence. I

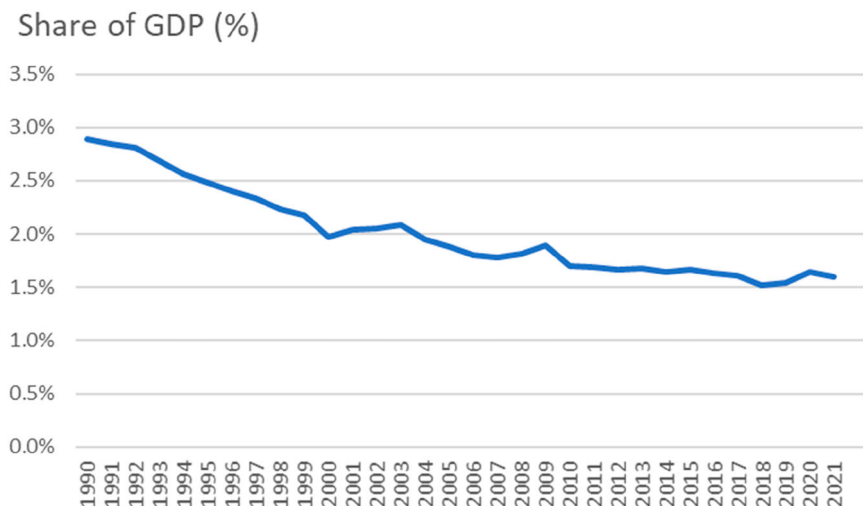
then show that East Asian countries are increasing, not limiting, their economic relations with China, and are also engaged in building a number of East Asian multilateral institutions that include China. The next section showcases how clearly most East Asian countries want to avoid choosing sides between the US and China. I then turn to briefly examining US policy toward the region, arguing that nascent American-led military alliances and the absence of economic initiatives are self-defeating for the United States. A final section directly examines the Taiwan issue, showing that not only does Taiwan not see a military solution to its survival, but also that almost every country in the region has clearly signaled they will not involve themselves in any conflict over Taiwan. This leads to a clear conclusion: a major element of America's strategy toward the region needs to be rethought, because almost no country in the region is eager to follow a US containment strategy.

## No Military Balancing in East Asia

The standard and most widely accepted definition of balancing is investments by states to “turn latent power (i.e., economic, technological, social and natural resources) into military capabilities.”<sup>8</sup> Overwhelmingly, the most common measure of balancing behavior in the scholarly literature is military spending as a percentage of GDP, because it most accurately reflects a country's fiscal priorities.<sup>9</sup> Every year, countries must decide how to allocate their scarce resources. Agencies compete for a limited set of finances, and more money devoted to national security means less money for domestic social or economic priorities. Thus, enduring trends in the allocation of resources to national defense is considered the most accurate indicator of a country's security priorities.

Overall in East Asia, no country has deemed it necessary to respond militarily to China's return to centrality. The proportion of the economy devoted to defense spending across the region as a whole is now almost half of what it was in 1990 and shows no sign of increasing (Figure 1). Specifically, the defense spending of nine main East Asian countries declined from an average of 2.88 percent of GDP in 1990 to an average of 1.6 percent in 2021. That is, the overall reduction in defense effort in East Asia is a generations-long and region-wide phenomenon. It is not a spurious result driven by a few outlier countries or outlier years.

Some have argued that China only began to be more assertive recently, so any response should also only be reflected recently. However, even the last few years do not show significant changes. As a share of the economy, many countries are still spending less proportionally in 2021 than they were even five years ago.<sup>11</sup> In

**Figure I. East Asian Military Expenditure as a Share of GDP, 1990–2021<sup>10</sup>**

sum, there is little evidence of anything approaching a regional balancing or containment.

Some scholars have argued that measuring absolute military spending is more important than measuring military spending as a proportion of the economy.<sup>12</sup>

**Most East Asian countries are decreasing the shares of their economies devoted to the military**

Yet this is highly misleading, and there is no theoretical basis for making that claim. It is widely interpreted that reductions in the proportion of spending are an indicator of lowered threat perceptions.<sup>13</sup> After all, if a country's share of its economy devoted to the military has been decreasing, then it has previously demonstrated the capacity to spend more on defense than it currently is. That a country chooses not to is surely indicative of the country's threat perceptions and priorities.

At a minimum, a region in which most countries are decreasing the shares of their economies devoted to the military—no matter how great the absolute increases—leads to the conclusion that there is no arms racing happening.

Yet even indulging this argument by examining absolute expenditures on defense reveals little response in the recent past. The median increase in absolute defense spending in the region (excluding China) over the past six years was 10 percent.<sup>14</sup> Median absolute expenditures on defense in the region in 2021 were

between 10 and 12 billion US\$. Australia increased from 23.7 to 28.4 billion US\$ (19.6%) and Taiwan by only 1.1, from 11.0 to 12.1 billion US\$ (9.0%) over those 6 years. Indonesia and Malaysia actually reduced their absolute defense spending. By comparison, the United States spends over \$700 billion on defense, and China \$270 billion.

Even Japan—widely viewed as skeptical about China—has not embarked on full-scale militarization. In May 2022, Prime Minister Kishida pledged to increase Japan’s defense spending, with the aim of reaching the NATO target level of 2 percent of GDP. There is some discussion that this time is different, and that Japan intends a sustained military buildup. It is true that SIPRI’s figures for the Japanese military budget in 2021 show a 7.3 percent increase since 2020 and an almost 18 percent increase over the decade 2012–2021. Yet in comparison, China’s military spending increased 72 percent over the decade of 2012–2021. If the trend of increased Japanese defense spending continues over a number of years, it is true that Japan will have made a major increase in its investment in its military.

Even these plans for sustained increases in Japanese defense spending need to be kept in context. First, two years of 7 percent increases in military spending do not yet constitute an enduring trend. Japan must continue large, perhaps even double-digit increases over a decade simply to maintain the current gap in spending with China. At the same time, Japan’s economy must grow at a reasonable pace. This may be relatively difficult to achieve—the Fiscal System Council, which advises the Japanese finance minister, said in May 2022 that “it is impossible to fulfill defense capabilities continuously and sufficiently without an economically, financially and fiscally strong macrostructure ... [Japan] might lose without even fighting.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps even more significantly, even a 7 or 8 percent increase in military spending is far from an overwhelming national response. The reality is that the Japanese military is already strong and can defend itself. At this point, it is not conclusive that Japan intends to do more than that.

Some argue that these overall low military expenditures by East Asian countries obscure asymmetric “porcupine” tactics and rapid military modernization.<sup>16</sup> However, the evidence for this is scarce. For example, the Philippines has only one principal surface combatant, a frigate, and a total of twelve 4<sup>th</sup> generation fighter jets with a 500-mile range which barely allows them to reach the Spratly Islands. Malaysia has two frigates and two diesel-powered attack submarines. Indonesia has four attack submarines and seven frigates. China has six nuclear-powered strategic submarines and 53 tactical submarines, as well as 80 principal surface combatants. The US Army is hoping to deploy long-range missiles within 1,000 kilometers of China. But, as Thomas Spoeher, a retired three-star Army general admitted in 2021, “Today, there is probably not one of our

regional partners in the first island chain that would be willing to base Army—or any other service—long range strike missiles in their country.”<sup>17</sup>

Australia, often viewed in the US as a key member of its alliance, is 3,000 miles from the South China Sea; Taiwan is 3,500 miles away.<sup>18</sup> Not only would Australia’s navy have to travel long distances, Australia “would have to mobilize practically the entire fleet simply to match the vertical-launch cell [missile] inventory of one Chinese cruiser.”<sup>19</sup> The main point remains: it is difficult to surmise anything other than an absence of arms racing in East Asia. These countries have demonstrated the capacity to devote far greater resources to their militaries if they so choose. That they do not indicates that these countries are not prioritizing a military response to China.

## No Economic Containment

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Containment also includes “the use of extensive economic restrictions that are designed to weaken a strategic challenger’s material capacity.”<sup>20</sup> In East Asia, an increasingly integrated, interactive region is emerging—a region in which

**Rather than withdrawing from economic relations with China, the region is interacting with it**

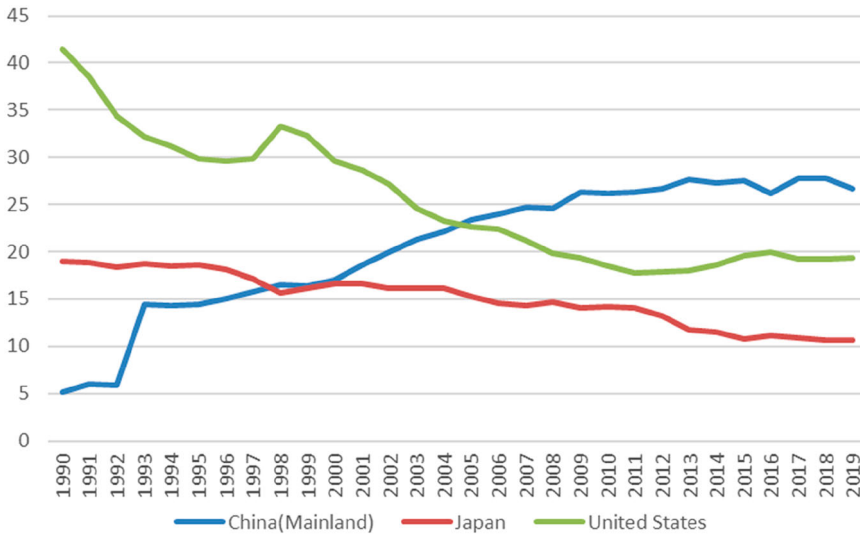
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countries want US engagement but are also increasingly searching for alternative and complementary institutional arrangements. Rather than regional countries withdrawing from relations with China, the region is interacting with China—from bridges built in Fiji to proposals for educational collaboration and development assistance across the Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

China is the largest foreign investor in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia; the United States is the largest foreign investor in China itself, Australia, Japan, South Korea and Singapore.<sup>22</sup> China has signed nine bilateral or multilateral free trade agreements with regional partners; the United States has signed three. And China provided \$36 billion dollars of overseas development assistance within the region in 2017, the last year data is available, compared to \$3 billion from the US.

In 1990, mainland China accounted for 5 percent of total regional trade (both imports and exports), while the United States accounted for over 40 percent of all regional trade. By the early 2000s, those lines had crossed, with China now accounting for more trade than the United States (Figure 2). By 2019—the latest year for which comprehensive data are available—trade with China comprised 27 percent of all regional trade, while the US share had dropped to less than 20 percent. If Hong Kong and Macao are included in the Chinese data,

**Figure 2. Chinese (mainland), US and Japanese Shares of Regional Trade, 1990–2020<sup>23</sup>**



Greater China's share of total trade jumps to almost 35 percent of East Asian trade.

Regarding regional multilateral institutions, in November 2020 China and fourteen other East Asian states—Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and South Korea among the signatories—signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Significantly, the United States chose not to participate. RCEP is the first trade agreement that includes China, South Korea and Japan as a triumvirate. It arose as a regional initiative of ASEAN in 2012, and is aimed at lowering tariffs, increasing investment, and allowing freer movement of goods around the region.

Another regional initiative is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Originally a Japanese initiative, TPP was a high-quality trade agreement that would have included the United States and eleven other North American, Latin American and East Asian countries, including Vietnam and Singapore but excluding South Korea and China. President Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement, yet the other eleven countries continued to sign a modified agreement in March 2018, calling it the “Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership” (CPTPP). China applied to join the CPTPP in September 2021, as did the UK, while South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines have all announced interest in applying. This move is significant but, as researchers Alex Lin and Saori Katada argue, not new—Chinese leaders



have consistently made aspirational statements about TPP entry since 2013.<sup>24</sup> China's geo-economic endgame was always to engage with both RCEP and TPP. As an indicator of intentions, China's application to join CPTPP is significant: China has reformed domestically far more rapidly than anyone envisioned even a decade ago. Its domestic economic practices and institutions may not yet be sufficient to join CPTPP, but it is moving in that direction.

The United States has claimed that Chinese high-tech manufacturer Huawei engages in espionage and should be banned. Although the US has banned Huawei from being involved in 5G in the United States, regional countries have had a mixed reaction. Some countries—such as Australia, Japan, Vietnam and India—are among the regional countries most involved in restricting Huawei. Japan, for example, excluded Huawei and ZTE from its domestic 5G rollout in December 2018. Vietnam has not explicitly barred Huawei from anything, but its leading telecommunication company, Viettel, picked European Ericsson and Nokia over Huawei on its 5G domestic networks in 2019. In May 2021, when India announced a list of carriers that were allowed to conduct 5G trails in the country, neither Huawei nor ZTE were on the list. Australia blocked Huawei from its 5G rollout in 2018.

In contrast, New Zealand lifted a ban on Huawei in 2020.<sup>25</sup> South Korea has an ambiguous stance on Huawei—it is a huge buyer of South Korean products. In 2018 alone, Huawei purchased over US\$10 billion worth of products from Samsung, a Korean company. Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia are generally even more receptive toward Huawei. Thailand launched a Huawei 5G testbed, and in 2020, the Philippines' largest telecom company PLDT launched 5G mobile service supplied by Huawei and Ericsson.<sup>26</sup> Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong downplayed the Huawei "security threat" by saying that it would be delusional to ask for 100 percent data security in the age of smartphones, and Malaysian Mahathir Mohamad Prime Minister said in 2019 that his country will use Huawei products "as much as possible" and that he would not reject Huawei's service just because of allegations surrounding security.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, the past 30 years have seen the region become increasingly economically integrated with China. Countries in the region have steadily traded and invested more with China, and there are few signs that countries are backing away in any consistent manner. And China itself has increasingly joined regional institutions.

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## East Asian Countries Do Not Want to Choose Sides

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Perhaps most significantly, almost no country in East Asia has clearly committed to a pro-US, anti-China position. Most countries in the region want to maintain

good relations with both. Few countries want to actively choose a side. For example, the 2022 “State of Southeast Asia” survey of elites found that if ASEAN nations were forced to align with one of the two strategic rivals, 43 percent (about 3/7) of respondents would choose China, while 57 percent (4/7) would choose the United States.<sup>28</sup>

**Most regional countries want to maintain good relations with both China and the US**

When asked about regional priorities, China is nowhere near the top. A 2021 poll found the top three challenges facing Southeast Asia were public health and pandemics (76 percent); unemployment and the economy (63 percent), and widening socio-economic gaps and rising income disparity (40.7 percent). Far down the list were “military tensions from potential flashpoints, e.g. South China Seas, Taiwan” (29.9 percent).<sup>29</sup> As Singaporean Prime Minister Lee remarked in April 2022, discussing the US view on China, “Whether it is Democrats or Republicans, whether it is on the Hill, in the think tanks or even in the media, a very deep sense has settled in that this [China] is a challenger that is different.” He added that his commitment is to “at least co-exist in this world,” signaling an unwillingness to embrace the US view.<sup>30</sup>

As to the Philippines, although in 2016 the Philippines took China to the International Tribunal in the Hague, this has not heralded an all-out commitment to a containment policy with robust attempts at working closely with the United States. Rather, the opposite has taken place over the past eight years. The election of Rodrigo Duterte led to more focus on internal challenges than on China.<sup>31</sup> Duterte was consistent in his generally accommodating stance toward China over five years, and yet public support for his presidency remained remarkably robust throughout his time.<sup>32</sup> Clearly, the Philippine public did not view Duterte’s stance on China as important enough to affect his popularity.

Duterte was not the exception in Philippine politics. The election of Bongbong Marcos in 2022 continued this trend. All of Marcos’ presidential opponents took a hardline stance toward China. Yet again, China was not a major factor in the election. Marcos decisively won the 2022 election with 58 percent of the vote. His nearest challenger, Leni Robredo, received 28 percent. Marcos said that the Philippines’ arbitration win against China was “not effective ... the only practical option” is a bilateral agreement with China, and that he thought an agreement was possible. In 2022, when asked if he would appeal to the United States to help in the dispute with China, Marcos replied “What kind of help [would the US bring]? Will they bring aircraft carriers and aim at warships? If war breaks out, who loses? Philippines. So let’s not allow the problem to escalate to a shooting, to a war.”<sup>33</sup>

In 2017, Thailand agreed to a \$400 million dollar submarine deal with China. That deal has become threatened because Germany will not allow its engines to be used for military purposes. Newly-elected South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol's ostensible pro-US approach is rhetorical at best, and there is no indication that Seoul will take any more substantive actions against Beijing. Indeed, President Yoon chose not to meet US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022 during her controversial tour across East Asia that included a stop in Taiwan. Yoon's office released a statement saying that "President Yoon declined to meet with Pelosi based on a comprehensive consideration for national interest," and the next day announced that Foreign Minister Park Jin would make his first visit to China.<sup>34</sup>

Indonesia is another country that has retained good relations with both China and the US. For example, Indonesian president Joko Widodo was one of the only foreign leaders to hold a summit with Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2022, visiting Beijing in July. COVID restrictions dramatically limited Xi's summits during 2022, so Xi's choice of meetings is revealing. The two leaders released a joint statement, which stated that "China and Indonesia have acted proactively and with a strong sense of responsibility to maintain regional peace and stability."<sup>35</sup> Asia researcher Evan Laksmana writes that "Indonesia is unlikely to see China – or for that matter, the United States – in the same way that Australia does ... Washington will never be as central to Jakarta as it has been for Canberra."<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, despite tensions between China and Vietnam over maritime claims in the South China Seas, there is also cooperation between the two countries. Chinese and Vietnamese navy chiefs agreed in June 2021 to set up a hotline in a move seen as a part of larger efforts to manage their relations. This is in addition to a direct line between the countries' defense ministries that was set up at the end of 2015. As of November 2021, Vietnam and China had conducted 22 joint naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, not only is Vietnam also not purchasing arms nor receiving military aid from the US, but it is not supporting US-led containment efforts through its rhetoric. In fact, Vietnam continues its explicit stance against joining any alliances. Vietnam introduced the "Three Nos" in 1998 as a fundamental approach to their foreign relations—no military alliances, no aligning with one country against another, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil. On August 24, 2021, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh held a meeting with Chinese Ambassador Xiong Bo. In what appeared to be a message directed at the United States, Prime Minister Chinh reiterated one of the "three nos," saying "Vietnam does not align itself with one country against another."<sup>38</sup> In addition, Vietnamese General Party Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong was the first foreign leader to visit China after Xi Jinping began his third term as General Secretary of the CCP in October 2022.

Indeed, Vietnam's open embrace of Russia in 2022 was a clear indicator that Hanoi has different foreign policy priorities than Washington. As a Vietnamese analyst with contacts across government and business remarked in 2022, "security leaders and personnel remain quite high on alert with regards to potential US-led regime change. They regularly publish quite anti-US editorials that get too little attention in foreign publications and news coverage about Vietnam today. And, the profound support for Russia in Ukraine is also one strong proxy of lingering anti-Americanism."<sup>39</sup>

Not all countries have neutral policies towards China. Australia and Japan are the most skeptical of China. Tokyo has been edging toward an openly antagonistic policy on China over the years. The 2022 Japanese Defense White Paper devoted ten pages to Taiwan, writing that "Taiwan is an extremely important partner for Japan ... The stability of the situation surrounding Taiwan is also critical for Japan's security and must be closely monitored with a sense of urgency ... based on the recognition that changes to the status quo by coercion are globally shared challenges."<sup>40</sup> For their part, Australia-China relations have deteriorated sharply in the past few years. The meeting between Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in July 2020 was the first such high-level meeting in over two years.

But overall, at best there is tepid and scattered support for US policies in the region.

### **Aspirational US Alliances—Quad, AUKUS, IPEF**

In contrast to the steady regional economic integration with China that is occurring in East Asia, the US approach to the region has been more rhetoric than actual substance over the past two administrations, reflected by the fact that the United States has institutionally disengaged from the region itself. In contrast, the US emphasizes three of its own organizations in East Asia, all of which implicitly align against China: an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF); the Quad (an informal grouping of Japan, Australia, India and the US), and the Australia-UK-US submarine grouping, known as AUKUS.<sup>41</sup> It is worth examining each of these organizations as possible tools for drumming up regional containment, especially because all three are incipient and have not yet clearly become central elements of East Asian security.

**The three incipient US organizations have not yet become central elements of regional security**

### Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

Over the past two administrations, the United States has pulled back from regional economic and diplomatic institutions, not toward them. President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the TPP in 2017 and did not attempt to join the RCEP. This disengagement was not unique to President Trump; President Biden has continued many of Trump's economic policies toward East Asia and clearly signaled that his administration has no intention of revising them.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the Biden Administration's stated aspiration to create a "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy" (FOIP) has yet to be followed by any concrete proposals. On May 23, 2022, the Biden administration revealed its "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework." Yet, the IPEF was only twelve paragraphs long and contained no concrete proposals. Indeed, the most telling line was "Today, we launch collective discussions toward future negotiations ..."<sup>43</sup> No market access or tariff reductions were in the framework. It contained only four general goals: connected, resilient, clean, and fair economies. But those are little more than guidelines, with nothing concrete and no US initiatives toward any of those goals spelled out.

### The Quad

"The Quad"—an informal grouping of India, Australia, Japan and the US—has always been aspirational. It is also explicitly not a security pact. The Quad only held its first meeting in 2017, and in 2022 the group discussed climate change, COVID-19, and technological innovation. No joint statement from the Quad

**Japan and Australia  
are most closely  
aligned to US  
interests; India is  
not**

has ever mentioned security. While Japan and Australia are probably the allies most closely aligned to US interests in the region; India is not.

India is a non-Western power that, unlike Japan, does not desire "honorary Western" status. New Delhi's clear unwillingness to join the West in criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, abstaining three times from criticizing Russia at UN votes, reveals just how dif-

ferently India views the world than the United States does. As Indian Major General Sanjay Meston said afterward, "India's vote at the UNSC is proof that our country has no intentions of interfering with the Western business," underscoring the Indian view that American concerns are not Indian concerns.<sup>44</sup> In response, US officials publicly stated that the Biden administration was "working to urge India to take a clear position" against Russia.<sup>45</sup> The US State

Department's Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, exhorted that the time had come for India to "further distance itself from Russia," and there were suggestions that the US might levy sanctions against India for buying Russian weapons.<sup>46</sup>

But well before and beyond its current neutrality, India has been a cautious member of the Quad. For example, India joined China's side in retaliatory tariffs against the United States in 2018.<sup>47</sup> India will clearly not follow US directives to the same degree that Japan and Australia do. It also clearly opposed expanding membership in the Quad, and explicitly calls the Quad a grouping that is "for something, not against somebody."<sup>48</sup> India does have a border dispute with China that is tense. But as yet, India's security concerns have not led India to openly embrace the Quad as a security forum. Until it does, the Quad will be an informal grouping, peripheral to East Asian security—just one coordination mechanism among many.

## AUKUS

The "AUKUS" is a new alliance of the US, UK and Australia, but its substance is minor at this time: the proposed jointly-built eight nuclear-powered submarines are not expected to be available until 2040 at the earliest.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the United States is struggling to meet its own shipbuilding needs, and a 2022 US Congressional report indicated that Australia may not be in a position to buy a US submarine even by 2040.<sup>50</sup> This is hardly a pivotal change in the overall military balance of East Asia.<sup>51</sup>

Not only is the substance of AUKUS suspect, many countries in the region are not supportive of it. In a meeting between the Malaysian and Indonesia foreign ministers after the announcement of the AUKUS deal, Malaysian Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah said that "although the country [Australia] stated that these are nuclear-powered submarines and not nuclear-armed ones, both our governments expressed concern and disturbance." Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi added that situation would "certainly not benefit anyone ... We [Malaysian FM and I] both agreed that efforts to maintain a peaceful and stable region must continue and don't want the current dynamics to cause tension in the arms race and also in power projection."<sup>52</sup>

These US-led economic or alliance structures in East Asia have little or no substance and do not appear to be central to East Asian concerns. There is little evidence that other countries wish to join the Quad. Both the Quad and AUKUS exist at the periphery of East Asia and appear set to remain that way both diplomatically and geographically. Furthermore, the United States is otherwise actively avoiding East Asian regional institutions.

## Taiwan Sees No Military Solution to its Survival

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### Even Taiwan is not containing or decoupling from China

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Even Taiwan is not containing China, and the evidence leads to the conclusion that Taiwanese leaders from both parties do not see a military solution to their existential problem, but rather one that is only possible through diplomatic

means. Taiwan has steadily reduced its defense spending over the years. In 2000, Taiwan devoted 2.6 percent of its GDP to defense; in 2021, that share had fallen to 1.74 percent, a drop of nearly 49 percent in the past two decades. In 2010, Taiwan had 290,000 military personnel in uniform. By 2021, the total was 169,000.<sup>53</sup> This decrease has occurred in the absence of any explicit

US commitment to its defense. In other words, Taiwan is not free riding or sheltering under the umbrella of a US military commitment to its defense. Rather, the opposite—even in the absence of a clear US military commitment, it has reduced its military and its defense spending considerably.

Taiwan is not decoupling from China either. The economic and social integration of China and Taiwan has proceeded rapidly since relations warmed in the late 1980s. In 1987, Taiwan lifted a ban on travel to China and, in 2008, allowed direct flights between Taiwan and the mainland. As of March 2020, total Taiwanese investment in China totaled US\$188.5 billion. In 2019, there were 2.68 million Chinese visitors to Taiwan.<sup>54</sup> In 2020, Taiwan's over \$250 billion of total trade with China amounted to 36 percent of its GDP, an exceptionally high level of economic integration.<sup>55</sup>

But more significant than the material integration of the two sides are the attitudes in Taiwan. Taiwanese clearly understand the status quo: a June 2022 opinion poll from National Chengchi University shows that 81 percent of Taiwanese favor maintaining the status quo in some form—indefinitely, deciding at a later date, or moving toward independence.<sup>56</sup> However, only 5.1 percent of respondents wanted immediate independence for the island. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who is from the nominally pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, clearly and repeatedly states that Taiwan does not need to declare independence.<sup>57</sup> The evidence is overwhelming that Taiwan has no intention of crossing the very clear red line of declaring independence that would trigger Chinese reactions.

Many East Asian leaders are also clearly not eager to use Taiwan as the centerpiece of a US-led containment strategy against China. For example, on November 4, 2021, Singaporean Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen said that “miscalculations can occur” over Taiwan. He said that, for China, “Taiwan

goes to the heart of the political legitimacy of the leader, of the party, and it's a deep red line. I can think of no scenario [in] which there are winners if there is actual physical confrontation over Taiwan. So, I would advise the U.S. to stay very far away from that."<sup>58</sup> In 2022, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, when asked if he would bend to "inevitable" pressure from the US to send Australian troops to defend Taiwan, refused to answer, saying he "didn't deal in hypotheticals," which are "not in the interest of peace and security in the region."<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, perhaps the best evidence that there is no containment coalition in East Asia that is searching for American leadership against China was the rapid distancing of East Asian countries from US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Some US analysts cheered her decision to stop off in Taiwan.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, East Asian leaders across the region quickly reaffirmed the One China policy. Indonesia's Foreign Ministry released a statement that: "calls on all parties to refrain from provocative actions" and added that Indonesia "continues to respect the One China policy."<sup>61</sup> Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang noted that "Vietnam persists in implementing the 'One China' principle and hopes relevant parties exercise restraint."<sup>62</sup> Thailand's Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanee Sangrat said simply: "Thailand stands by the 'One China' policy."<sup>63</sup> Other countries that explicitly reiterated their support for the One China Policy following Pelosi's visit included ASEAN as a group, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore.<sup>64</sup> India made no mention of the visit, nor did South Korea or Japan. Both were clearly signaling that this is not an issue they will join the US on. In sum, while some analysts in the US view Taiwanese independence as a key element of containing China, it is fairly clear that almost no country in the region would involve itself in a war, especially if it perceives that any change in the status quo has been provoked by the United States.

## Containment's Not in the Works

A review of evidence from around the region leads to the conclusion that the containment coalition so confidently predicted by decades of US scholars is far from incipient. Rather than challenging China's rise, most regional states are adjusting to China, integrating with it economically, and attempting to manage that rise as much as possible. China has already managed a rapid regional power transition. The only question is how much larger the gap between China and its neighbors will become. And East Asian countries have steadily reduced their defense spending, which suggests that these countries do not think most of the region's unresolved issues are worth fighting over. All countries in the



region have to coexist with each other—none are picking up and moving somewhere else. Countries are dealing with that reality and seeking diplomatic, commercial and multilateral relations with each other, and with China, rather than military strategies.

East Asian states certainly have residual issues with China to contend with, such as maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas, and countries in the region are working toward that end. Yet, the evidence clearly shows that the US military is not the best or first way East Asian states are seeking to achieve those ends. Countries are looking for diplomatic solutions, not military ones. If the US plans a containment coalition against China, there is little evidence that any East Asian country will join it. Combined with the lack of a coherent American economic or diplomatic strategy for the region from Republican or Democratic presidential administrations alike, this is evidence of the US' illusory views of itself and of the world, and of an almost stubborn unwillingness by the US policymaking elite to update their theoretical views of East Asia to present realities. It is far past time for that update to take place.

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## Notes

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