



The Elusive Indo-Pacific Coalition: Why Geography Matters

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The Elusive Indo-Pacific Coalition: Why Geography Matters

Writing as a presidential candidate in 2020, Joe Biden vowed that his administration would “place the United States back at the head of the table,” ready to “work with its allies and partners to mobilize collective action on global threats.”¹ When it came to confronting China, this promise was more than mere words: his administration has invested extensively to reassert US military supremacy in the Indo-Pacific, strengthening and expanding security ties with regional allies and partners but also keeping the United States firmly and decisively in the lead. As we argued earlier this year, the Biden administration, like those before it, remains committed to US primacy in the Indo-Pacific.² But unlike his predecessor’s America-First, go-it-alone approach, in a tacit acknowledgement that the unipolar moment has ended and that sustaining US primacy is costlier than in the past, Biden has made strengthening regional alliances and partnerships a cornerstone of his approach. The administration’s China strategy aims to actively lead a group of allies and partners willing to help underwrite the costs of maintaining US military dominance in the Indo-Pacific, artificially propping up US regional primacy with coalition support.³

Though the Biden team has made some marginal gains toward this goal, overall progress has been slow and halting—but not for lack of investment.

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Washington's failure reflects the realities of Asia's punishing geography

Instead, Washington's failure reflects the realities of Asia's punishing geography, which keeps both continued US regional primacy and the military coalition the United States needs to support it out of reach. Specifically, the region's maritime

environment and vast distances reduce perceptions of China as an existential threat for most countries across the region—but especially Australia and those in Southeast Asia—as well as the assessed strategic benefits of aligning more closely with Washington. States in the region look upon the sea as a natural defensive barrier against attack, reducing their incentives to make large-scale defensive investments or participate in a balancing

coalition to counter China. Those same dynamics also work against the credibility of US military commitments, as distance not only impedes the rapid projection of US military power but the air and naval forces most relevant to the Indo-Pacific are also highly mobile and can be easily withdrawn, making regional countries leery of lining up behind the United States.

Given these geographic hurdles, the Biden administration's military coalition building strategy—executed primarily by the US Department of Defense—is exceedingly ambitious. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs Ely Ratner recently outlined three lines of effort through which Biden's national security team seeks to construct a US-led regional military coalition to confront China.⁴ First, the United States aims to diversify its military access and basing in the region. Washington has long relied on a global network of military bases to rapidly project power into other regions, but the “tyranny of distance” and Chinese missile threats require the United States to distribute its forces more widely to additional access locations hosted by allies and partners.⁵ Second, Washington aims to build a networked security architecture in the Indo-Pacific by linking together US bilateral, minilateral and multilateral security partnerships to form what Pentagon officials have called “a latticework of ... mutually reinforcing coalitions.”⁶ Finally, Washington supports increased allied and partner military capabilities, especially long-range strike, that defense leaders hope can supplement US military power and strengthen deterrence against China while reducing the costs of maintaining US primacy.⁷

Three years in, however, Washington still lacks the military access it would need to create a more distributed force posture in the region, its region-wide security architecture remains ill-suited to mobilizing a collective and coordinated response in the event of Chinese aggression, and its allies and partners continue to underinvest in their own defense. Given the geographic barriers it faces, the limited success of the Biden administration's military coalition-building project

is unsurprising. Falling back on the protection provided by the sea and questioning US commitments, countries in the region have been—and are likely to remain—unwilling to opt into the type of coalition the United States needs to enable its continued regional military primacy.

Instead, this paper argues that the United States should leverage the region's unique geography to its strategic advantage and focus on balancing, not exceeding, Chinese power in the region. The same long distances, water barriers, and limited geographical options for forward basing that make it harder for the United States to maintain regional primacy also make it easier to prevent China from achieving its own regional hegemony. This is an achievable goal, but it will require building a different kind of military coalition.

As it builds partnerships in the region, Washington should leverage the region's geography and adopt a regional strategy of “offshore balancing”—that is, turning to its allies and partners to check China's rise rather than assuming the role itself of first-line defense provider. First, Washington should de-emphasize its push for expanded military access and focus instead on preparing its military to fight a war at sea, including investing in more long-range anti-ship strike capabilities as well as hardening existing ports and airfields against Chinese missile attacks. Second, rather than trying to create a region-wide and US-centric security architecture, which is better suited to a continental system, Washington needs to plug into the Indo-Pacific's existing sub-regional mini- and multilateral groups—like ASEAN—more effectively, learning to navigate the region's flexible alignments and widely diverging interests to achieve necessary collective action. Finally and most important, the United States should encourage and incentivize allies and partners to strengthen their own defenses, investing more in air defense, anti-ship missiles, and uncrewed systems which capitalize on defensive advantages in the maritime domain. This approach stands a better chance because it works with regional geography and political dynamics, not against them.

This article begins with a discussion of geographic impediments to Indo-Pacific coalition formation. It then assesses both the successes and failures of each of the Biden administration's three military coalition-building lines of effort—military access, security architecture, and ally and partner capabilities—highlighting how geography has thwarted the Biden team's intentions. The final section lays out an alternative regional strategy of offshore balancing and an approach to military coalition building that would allow the United States to leverage the region's geography to sustainably balance Chinese power and prevent Chinese hegemony.

A region-wide, US-centric security architecture is better suited to a continental system

Unforgiving Geography

“All politics is geopolitics,” the strategist Colin Gray observed, emphasizing that “all political matters occur within a particular geographical context; in short, they have a geopolitical dimension.”⁸ Gray—like classic strategists Alfred Thayer Mahan, Alfred J. Mackinder, and Nicholas Spykman—understood that geography shapes the strategic environment in which states operate, affecting the ends, ways and means of grand strategy.⁹ When it comes to military coalition building in Asia, however, Washington seems to have forgotten this lesson.

Observing the US military coalition-building project in the Indo-Pacific, many national security stakeholders are optimistic that, despite setbacks, it will ultimately succeed—believing that remaining gaps in US military access, the regional security architecture, and partner capabilities will be easier to fill over time as more countries become more concerned with China’s regional threat.¹⁰ This confidence, however, is unwarranted; it fails to account for how geography constrains, much more than it enables, coalition building against China. Specifically, the region’s maritime geography and vast size conspire against the Biden team’s coalition aspirations and its pursuit of continued regional military dominance in three key ways.

First, the maritime nature of the Indo-Pacific theater creates perhaps the most significant geographic barrier to Biden’s hoped-for regional military coalition. Specifically, the Pacific and Indian Oceans create powerful defensive barriers that drive states away from the large-scale defense investments and military coalition participation Washington seeks, and toward buck-passing and complacency. The political scientist John Mearsheimer argues that because the “stopping power of water” protects maritime states, it is much harder for a

continental land power—like China—to send its attacking army ashore in such places.¹¹ As a result, maritime states tend to be more sanguine about the threat posed by land powers.¹² Case in point: countries like Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines are wary of China’s regional maritime aggression, but tend not to see Beijing as an existential threat.

The Indo-Pacific’s maritime environment complicates extended deterrence

The Indo-Pacific’s maritime environment also complicates the practice of extended

deterrence. The naval and air forces most relevant to the Indo-Pacific are highly mobile. They can be quickly deployed but also quickly withdrawn. This mobility undermines the credibility of US promises to defend allies and partners. It gives Indo-Pacific countries reason to question US staying power, exacerbating

fears of abandonment but also discouraging them from pursuing a strategy that might seem “all risk and little reward” by aligning too closely with the United States.¹³

Second, in addition to separating these countries from China, the Indo-Pacific’s vast expanses of water also separate potential coalition states from each other. The large swathes of ocean between countries complicate the development of the shared regional threat assessment needed to motivate coalition formation. The maritime distances between countries also mean that there is no clear invasion route from one country to the next or a single “frontline” as exists in the European context to spur collective action and coordination. Whereas in Europe, an invasion of one country has historically created fears in neighbors that their own country will be next—a powerful driver of military coalitions—any aggressor hoping to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific would need to conduct several independent amphibious campaigns to conquer each of the region’s island states.¹⁴ This is not impossible, of course, but the added difficulty further de-links the threat assessments of regional states and provides them with a generous margin of error, yet another impediment to military coalition formation.

Finally, the region’s sheer size, encompassing more than 100 million square miles, or some 50 percent of the Earth’s surface, impedes military coalition building. The Indo-Pacific construct, which reframed the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single geopolitical entity, is fairly new, gaining widespread use only after 2010. Even if the term has some utility for US policymakers, it tends to obscure the incredible diversity of interests and varying threat perceptions that exist between sub-regions—that is, in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific Islands.¹⁵ Like the large distances between states, the size of the Indo-Pacific theater impedes identifying common interests among states, particularly agreement over the region’s priority security concerns. The large size of the theater also hinders the projection of US military power, or what the economist Kenneth E. Boulding called the “loss-of-strength” gradient, creating enormous logistics challenges and reducing the amount of combat power the United States can generate and sustain in the region. This gives Indo-Pacific countries added reason to question the credibility of US military commitments and to tread carefully in making their alignment choices.¹⁶

No investment of American time, resources and diplomacy would enable Washington to change the region’s geography or overcome the immutable barriers it creates. Because of this unique geography, countries across the Indo-Pacific—even US allies—are unwilling to make the coalition commitments that many in the United States might expect based on experience in other contexts, namely that of continental Europe. To the extent the United States may rally a military coalition in the face of Chinese aggression, it is likely to be small and slow to organize, and there is little Washington can do to hasten or

augment the process in advance of such aggression. The Biden administration's dismal results thus far on its three military coalition-building goals—securing additional military access, building a networked alliance architecture, and strengthening allied and partner capabilities—bear this out.

Access Denied

Of the Biden administration's three lines of effort, it has invested the most energy on the issue of regional military access. The US military aims to distribute its forces more widely across the theater, maintaining a position of regional military dominance. As Admiral John Aquillino, the Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, explained last year, "A widespread and distributed force posture ... gives [the US military] the ability to more easily exercise and operate with our partners, increases survivability, reduces risk, and sustains the force with a network of stores, munitions, and fuel."¹⁷

Efforts to meet US military access requirements in the Indo-Pacific have historically been plagued by two gaps. First, as Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell wrote in 2019 before entering the Biden White House, the United States needs to expand access in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, where forces would be less vulnerable but still close to key maritime chokepoints, so they would be able to more easily project military power into the region.¹⁸ Second,

Washington has had only limited success in addressing critical military access gaps

the United States requires additional access locations which come with permission to conduct strike operations against Chinese forces in a contingency—that is, not limited to the immediate defense of allied or partner territory. While most observers expect the United States to have access to bases in Japan, Guam and Palau in the event of a conflict,¹⁹ the use of US bases in South Korea and rotational access locations in the Philippines and Singapore would likely be restricted due

to concerns in these countries about Chinese retaliation and competing national security threats (e.g., North Korea), leaving the United States with few options for strike operations.²⁰

Despite immense investment, Washington has had only limited success in addressing these critical gaps. The Biden team has secured new military access in Papua New Guinea,²¹ pending the country's parliamentary approval, and expanded permissions for US forces to use additional bases in Australia and the Philippines.²² But these developments cannot substitute for the needed

additional access in the strategically important heart of Southeast Asia—namely Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. US efforts to expand access in these countries have come to little. Vietnam has long ruled out any foreign military presence, and both Malaysia and Indonesia have pushed back against US plans to expand presence or send nuclear-powered submarines through their waters.²³

The region's vast size and dispersed geography make expanded basing arrangements in Southeast Asia a strategic necessity when it comes to confronting China. Without this access, the US military will find it much harder to achieve the distributed force posture the Pentagon says it needs to outmaneuver China's People's Liberation Army (PLA). In the absence of necessary permissions, for instance, the US Air Force would have to rely primarily on runways in Japan and Guam, expected to come under intense Chinese air and missile strikes in a contingency. In addition, without such permissions, US forces operating from Australia would have to avoid Indonesian waters as well as airspace and follow longer routes to the Taiwan Strait, expending precious time and fuel. Washington could decide to ignore access restrictions, but such unilateral actions would invite regional political backlash.

The Biden team has also not made much progress on the issue of contingency—or wartime—access. Locations in Papua New Guinea and the Philippines permit US military use during peacetime, but under the respective agreements, Washington would need to consult with its hosts before using bases for contingency operations. However, both President Marcos of the Philippines and President Marape of Papua New Guinea have explicitly ruled out Washington using bases on their territory to strike Chinese targets or stockpile material to support such operations, except possibly in the case of a direct attack by the PLA on their homelands.²⁴ This lack of contingency access, particularly in Southeast Asia, makes maintaining US regional primacy infinitely more challenging, and the Biden administration has made little—if any—progress on expanding it.

Power Networking

The second line of effort—building a networked security architecture—seeks to link together US Indo-Pacific allies and partners, with the United States in the lead, to counter China.²⁵ For the Biden administration, the US role should be to act as the convener of regional alliances and coalitions, especially in the military domain. As Assistant Secretary of Defense Ratner described in March 2022, “For the U.S. military, our defense relationships and our ability to bind them more tightly together into coalitions that operate together can make clear to any potential adversaries the unacceptable costs of aggression.”²⁶

In this line of effort, the United States faces two challenges. First, there are few countries in the region willing to commit to a US-led security architecture, especially if it requires them to choose between the United States and China. President Marcos of the Philippines said as much last year, calling on countries to reject a “Cold War mindset” in the face of “strong” pressure “to choose one side or the other.”²⁷ Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi similarly echoed the sentiment, saying of Southeast Asia: “We are not interested in being part of a new Cold War.”²⁸ Likewise, as much as India has expanded its strategic partnership with the United States in the last few years, it remains committed to maintaining its autonomy. As Kurt Campbell, then the White House’s coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, admitted, “India has a unique strategic character ... [and] a desire to be an independent powerful state,” not a US ally.²⁹ Moreover, even close allies seem at best ambivalent about Washington’s efforts to construct a US-centered security architecture in the region. Australia, South Korea and Japan have all retained constructive ties with China, while also building closer relationships with each other as well as other states in the region.

Efforts to build a single cohesive security architecture are further challenged by the diverging interests and preferences of states in the Indo-Pacific’s geographically spread-out and distinct subregions. Countries in Northeast Asia, specifically Japan, are considerably more concerned about Chinese aggression toward Taiwan than are other countries in the region, while for Southeast Asia the focus is the South China Sea, and India’s priority is its own border and the security of maritime transit. Acquiring the needed military commitments from states with such a diversity of interests is challenging, forcing the United States to default to primarily non-binding minilaterals, like its trilateral with South Korea and Japan, or to focus on non-military engagement. The resulting groups serve many purposes, but they are ill-suited to support US regional dominance.

Security relationships in Asia have historically been fragmented and under-institutionalized

Second, Biden’s military coalition-building project in the Indo-Pacific has not succeeded in putting in place the institutional mechanisms needed to direct collective military action with allies and partners. In Europe, NATO serves this role—aligning military planning, facilitating information sharing, and establishing the processes needed for combined military operations and multinational commands, for example—but security

relationships in Asia have historically been more fragmented and under-institutionalized. The Biden team has worked with allies to address this challenge, including holding the first-ever quadrilateral US-Australia-Japan-Philippines

defense minister talks in June 2023.³⁰ Such efforts are quite modest, however, considering the requirements to effectively coordinate action across allies and partners in a crisis.

For instance, the Quad—a partnership of Australia, Japan, India and the United States—has launched an initiative to improve maritime awareness in the region, but progress has been slow, limited to sharing unclassified information and not including fora to build a shared intelligence picture.³¹ Quad countries have also signed logistics and information-sharing agreements, but these remain bilateral—not Quad-wide. It is also not clear that there is sufficient political will from all parties to expand this machinery to the degree that may be required for their governments to coordinate an effective collective response in a regional security crisis—military or otherwise. India, for example, has expanded bilateral military cooperation with Quad countries, but it is reticent to embrace a traditional regional security role for the Quad.

The problem extends to US bilateral alliances. Even though Washington counts Tokyo as the ally most likely to join US-led military operations in a cross-Strait conflict, it lacks a combined US-Japanese command to operate together effectively.³² For all the talk of interoperability, US and Japanese forces have relatively little ability to coordinate, plan, operate and sometimes even communicate together in the event of a crisis. Japanese domestic legal and political hurdles stand in the way of achieving the necessary integration, as there are strict Japanese constitutional limits on the use of force, preventing self-defense personnel from serving under US command.³³ The reluctance of regional states to fully opt into US security networks and the lack of mechanisms needed to support collective action within new and old partnerships are fatal barriers to the Biden administration's effort to create a US-centric security architecture able to sustain US regional military primacy.

Stronger Together?

The Biden administration's final line of effort—building the military capabilities of allies and partners in the region—departs from past US attempts to achieve and maintain primacy in the Indo-Pacific. During and after the Cold War, US military power alone was enough to underwrite the region's security and defense. Today, China's growing military capabilities—as well as its geographic advantage—make such an approach costly and unsustainable. Rather than abandon military primacy altogether, the Biden administration wants to leverage the capabilities of allies and partners to help defray some of those costs. Accordingly, the United States has pressed allies and partners to build and acquire capabilities Washington itself needs the most—and where it currently has gaps,

including attack submarines and long-range missiles—rather than those most critical to their own self-defense, such as naval mines and air defense. As Ratner put it, Washington is helping its allies and partners to “develop the capabilities they need to defend themselves to be able to contribute more to our alliances.”³⁴

But US efforts in this area have had only marginal success. While Japan and Australia have increased defense spending, the additional investment falls far short of what is needed to address the most significant shortcomings in US regional capabilities, and new funding allocated by countries in Southeast Asia has been small or nonexistent. Furthermore, the prioritization of capabilities which can plug easily into US operations has often come at the expense of allies and partners addressing critical gaps in self-defense, leaving Washington facing the worst of both worlds—partners who spend too little and on the wrong defense systems. Japan would be better off investing in more air defense, for example, than on the costly long-range strike systems Washington advocated for and celebrated.³⁵

When it comes to possible contributions to US operations, the Biden administration has the highest expectations for Japan and Australia, particularly in a Taiwan contingency. Both countries have announced plans to increase their defense spending and acquire long-range strike capabilities which could be used against Chinese targets in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. But there is less to these plans than meets the eye. Much greater commitments would be needed to meaningfully reduce the US regional defense burden, and what commitments have been made pull scarce funding away from other capabilities that both countries need to take greater responsibility for their self-defense, leaving them still largely dependent on Washington.

For example, Japan’s intended budget increase does not double defense spending, but rather raises it a more modest 65 percent over five years.³⁶ While nothing to scoff at given decades of underspending, the additional money is only a drop in the bucket of what is needed to modernize Japan’s Self Defense Force.³⁷ The United States has praised Japan’s decision to purchase 400 US-made Tomahawk cruise missiles—the anti-ship variant—that would allow it to strike Chinese targets in the Taiwan Strait or East China Sea.³⁸ But in such small numbers and without other key supporting capabilities—especially a modernized command-and-control system to guide those missiles to their targets—they will be of limited use in any US-led operations against China.³⁹ As important, investments in long-range strike and other high-end capabilities absorb much of Japan’s new spending. Tokyo might be better off spending its limited defense funds on systems that would push it toward defense self-sufficiency more quickly. Long-range strike capabilities are an inefficient and expensive way to go about this task. Investments in air

defense, munitions, hardened infrastructure, naval mines, and uncrewed aircraft and surface vessels would more directly strengthen Japan's defense, even if they do less to support US offensive operations.⁴⁰

Australia has similarly increased its defense spending and shifted substantial funding toward power projection capabilities, including US-produced long-range strike missiles and several nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS agreement.⁴¹ These planned purchases overlap with high priority US operational needs, but long timelines and small numbers will significantly limit Australia's contributions to regional defense for at least a decade. Without serious investments in basic supporting capabilities like mobility, maintenance, logistics, and moreover intelligence, the value of these systems will be substantially reduced.⁴² Australia's defense minister has also warned that the country's military faces a "personnel crisis" and admitted it is an "enormous" struggle to find skilled workers for the defense industry, raising questions about whether Australia can meet the production, personnel or support requirements of the AUKUS-produced submarines it has earmarked hundreds of billions of dollars towards.⁴³ At \$52.6 billion in 2023, however, Australia's defense budget just barely reaches 2 percent of GDP, pointing to a lack of urgency to resolve these fundamental issues.⁴⁴

Beyond these two core allies, some in Washington have high expectations for South Korea. For example, General Paul LaCamera, Commander of US Forces Korea, noted in his 2021 confirmation hearing that "given the international reach of the South Korean military, opportunities are emerging for alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula."⁴⁵ While few expect Seoul to send its own forces to fight alongside the United States in a Taiwan or South China Sea contingency, in US statements and military exercises, the Pentagon has expressed hopes that Seoul will offer assistance in other areas—such as logistics, maintenance, resupply and refueling operations, and non-combatant evacuations—in addition to taking responsibility for its own self-defense.⁴⁶

Washington has had limited success in pushing South Korea toward such investments. Seoul spends more on defense than most countries in the region, but in recent years South Korea has tended toward investing in expensive, high-end systems—such as submarine-launched ballistic missiles, fifth-generation fighter aircraft, and space capabilities—rather than in badly-needed hardened infrastructure, air defense, and ground and sea transport capabilities.⁴⁷ Furthermore, South Korea's military is also shrinking, leading some defense experts to question its state of military readiness.⁴⁸ These continued issues are likely to keep Seoul dependent on American military power—especially with South Korea's military focused primarily on the threat from North Korea—

exacerbating the problem of US overextension and undercutting US efforts to retain its regional primacy.

Elsewhere in the region, Washington has encouraged countries to invest in mobile and inexpensive denial-based capabilities—for example, anti-ship missiles, air defenses, drones, and naval mines—that would allow them to deny a quick and decisive victory to China, even if they cannot defeat its military outright in battle. Taiwan, for example, cannot hope to match China ship for ship, or

Taiwan cannot match China, but it can make itself a hard-to-conquer “porcupine”

missile for missile, but it can make itself a hard-to-conquer “porcupine,” which promises to turn any war into a prolonged campaign rather than a swift and hard-to-reverse *fait accompli*.⁴⁹ Washington’s entreaties have had mixed results, however. Many countries talk the talk, but few have ramped up military spending to the degree that would be required for them to meaningfully share the defense burden with the United States.

Despite growing Chinese threats, Taiwan’s defense spending remains just above 2 percent of GDP, while progress on personnel reforms has been slow and disappointing.⁵⁰ Taipei has taken some tentative steps toward adopting a denial posture, but Washington has done little to press the issue. In 2019, Washington approved sizeable sales of prestige items, such as Abrams tanks and F-16 fighter jets, that have low odds of survival and low utility in the event of a Chinese attack or blockade of the island—approvals driven more by domestic political and economic factors than true military necessity or utility.⁵¹

Washington may not expect countries in South and Southeast Asia to participate directly in US-led military operations, but it would like them to modernize and expand their self-defense capabilities. Low budgets and competing domestic agendas have resulted in only incremental progress toward this end. As of 2023, Southeast Asian countries on average still spend only 1.39 percent of GDP on defense.⁵² Similarly, India’s modernization program faces budget uncertainties that could derail its intention to improve its defense industrial capacity.⁵³

Thus, despite increases in defense spending across the Indo-Pacific region, the Biden administration remains a long way from being able to shift costs onto allies and partners. In part, this shortfall reflects the rational calculation of states in the region that they can afford to spend far less on defense than what a comparable land power might consider necessary and what the United States has hoped for. As a result, Washington is no closer to aligning the means and ends of its defense strategy, which leaves its regional position

untenable and regional primacy unsustainable—with or without the support of a military coalition.

An Offshore Balancing Coalition

Because of the region's geography, the military coalition Washington wants is unattainable, and so is continued US primacy in the Indo-Pacific. More importantly, pursuing that goal leaves the United States overstretched, with more regional security commitments than it can resource despite US defense spending approaching one trillion-dollars per year.⁵⁴ To protect US national security interests, Washington should pivot toward a strategy of offshore balancing that works with—not against—the Indo-Pacific's unique maritime environment to deny Chinese hegemony. As we have argued previously, such an approach would look significantly different than one premised on US primacy.⁵⁵ This strategy would not entail appeasing Chinese territorial aggression or abandoning US allies and partners, but it would force the United States to prioritize its regional investments and activities more narrowly, and fundamentally shift its approach to coalition building. Washington should build the needed regional posture by making three changes, one to each of its military coalition-building lines of effort.

First, recognizing that the region's size places a premium on a small number of prime access locations and complicates US efforts to achieve the distributed force posture needed for regional primacy, offshore balancing relaxes the requirement for expanded US military access. Instead of seeking more access across the region—especially in far-off locations in the South Pacific—Washington should focus its efforts on three key objectives. First, the United States should harden the assets and access locations it already has, including investing in modernized and expanded air bases and ports and more air defense at US facilities in Japan and Guam. Although the Pentagon is aware of the need for such investments, they remain under-resourced.⁵⁶ Second, the United States can also supplement existing access points with use of afloat bases—mobile landing platforms which can support a range of US military operations—and forward-stationed equipment and materiel (known as prepositioned stocks) to extend the reach and range of US forces.⁵⁷ The US military should also be prepared to operate at longer distances and invest significantly more in long-range strike assets—especially air- and sea-launched missiles, such as the anti-ship Tomahawk, that can hit mobile targets—and uncrewed and autonomous

An offshore balancing strategy would make three changes to US military coalition-building efforts

surface vessels and aerial systems which can travel longer distances and assume greater risks than inhabited vessels or aircraft.

Second, rather than trying to create a US-centric, region-wide Indo-Pacific security architecture, Washington needs to adopt an approach aligned with the region's geographical dispersion and one that favors many small groupings over one large and cohesive alliance. For the United States, this means becoming more effective at navigating the Indo-Pacific's existing subregional alignments, especially those among non-traditional US partners in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. For example, Washington should work quickly to institutionalize ties with countries across Southeast Asia that currently have less well-developed relationships with the United States such as Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries can play a key role in balancing Chinese power because of their geographic location on strategically important waterways, and in Indonesia's case its economic potential. In addition to necessary bilateral agreements, Washington should continue to make use of minilateral engagement oriented around narrow, shared interests and work to integrate itself more fully into the political, economic and security networks that already exist, including ASEAN and its subgroups.

Finally and most importantly, the United States should leverage the “stopping power of water” and let its allies and partners take the lead in regional security and defense. For most countries, this means investing heavily in denial-based capabilities and turning into heavily fortified, hard to conquer “porcupines” by acquiring large numbers of relatively cheap and mobile assets such as uncrewed ships, aerial drones, naval mines, anti-ship missiles, and air defenses.⁵⁸ Since the security blanket provided by the sea will push countries away from making these investments on their own, Washington will need to be prepared to exert meaningful pressure on regional partners to push them to increase defense spending and focus that spending on denial-based capabilities. The use of conditionality offers one pathway, but the United States should also seize on the expressed interest of countries like Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam in increasing their indigenous defense production. By seeding this development—in some cases with co-production deals and technology sharing—the United States can help regional allies and partners achieve a degree of self-sufficiency more quickly.

In the end, Washington should bear in mind that the challenges of the region's geography do not only affect the United States. They also affect China, which may seek military access in some of the same Southeast Asian locations that the United States has identified as desirable, such as Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. The United States should focus its efforts on ensuring their neutrality and preventing China's expanded access to bases and facilities

in this strategically important area—a task that should be considerably easier than trying to talk them into an exclusive US partnership.

Although China is indeed a formidable strategic competitor, denying it the regional hegemony many believe it seeks is an achievable goal. The alternative—continued pursuit of US primacy in the Indo-Pacific—is not only unsustainable, but it endangers US national security interests. Achieving this goal calls for a new strategic approach, as outlined here, and a different kind of military coalition—an offshore balancing military coalition—aligned with not just the political dynamics, but also the punishing geography of the region.

Notes

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