



# A New NATO? the United States Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region

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**Abstract.** In recent years, the conflict between China and the United States has drawn tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. With the worry about the escalation of the conflict, there is a discussion of whether a new NATO in the Indo-Pacific region will be formed to counter the Chinese government's influences. This essay is focused on the United States national strategy in the Asia-Pacific region and analyzes the United States' historical concerns and its realism fear, strategy toward China, and Indo-Pacific state's attitude. From a general consideration of the United States, this essay assumes that the United States will keep its hedging strategy on China, and the possibility of forming a new NATO in the Asia-Pacific region is significantly low but still potentially exist such a tendency.

**Keywords:** Realism, China and United States relation, ASEAN.

## 1 Introduction

Since 1979, China and the United States have established a formal relationship, and the two governments hold a complicated relationship that includes cooperation and conflict. In recent years, with uprising Chinese influences worldwide, the United States tends to choose more targeted strategies to compete with the Chinese government in international society. Especially after the Russo-Ukraine War, this attention draws a question of whether to form a similar organization around China to contain its influence. For this purpose, the United States has held a strong alliance with countries such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea in Asia. In the Biden-Harris Administration's National Security Strategy document, the United States emphasizes the competition with the People's Republic of China again <sup>[1]</sup>.

This paper is built on the discussion on whether the United States is willing to form a multilateral defensive organization in Asia and how will the United States take its diplomatic attitude toward the U.S.-China relationship. Through the analysis of the United States' historical concerns and its realism fear, strategy toward China, and Indo-Pacific state's attitude, the paper will explore the attitude of the United States towards China in the long run and whether the United States can form a real regional defensive organization in the Indo-Pacific region.

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## 2 United States' Historical Concern and the Realism Fear

On February 22nd, 1946, the American deputy head of the mission in Moscow, George Kennan, sent the famous “long telegram” to the secretary of state. In the telegram, George Kenna emphasized the upcoming threat of Communism power and the Soviet Union in particular. He also urged the United States must utilize every opportunity in the international society to contain the Soviet Union and carefully deal with groups that may connect with the Communism ideology <sup>[2]</sup>. This concept made the United States government start to seriously consider communism and the Soviet Union as a threat to itself and the Western world. The same concept can also be found in the NSC-68, stating how the United States government should take specific techniques for containing communism. Starting from this period, communism has already been verified by the United States as a threat that can not be compromised. This consideration shaped the root of the United States government's policies toward communist states.

This concept of the cold war seems to be reflected in the United States' relationship with the Chinese government. The United States government turning to a more hostile attitude toward China and its international influence is not coincidental but actually motivated by the root of its anti-communism concept.

In the book *Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides proposed a concept that the Spartans were afraid of the rising power of the Athen. Such fear motivated them to end the unavoidable conflict. This concept was rephrased and used by the American scholar Graham T. Allison in the “Thucydides Trap”, which means that if an emerging power threatens a great power's position as hegemon, there will be a war between the two powers. This theory was proposed to describe the conflict between the China and the United States which began in recent years. The theory also emphasized the possibility of a conflict between China and the United States. Considering the Chinese influence power rising recently, the United States may take the “Thucydides Trap” theory seriously.

Some scholars like Brandon Yoder believe that the Chinese government is credible in actual cooperation and given enough credibility to avoid a preventive war with the United States. However, in the US government and scholars, there is always a lack of certain trust in the Chinese government, and misinterpreted Chinese messages <sup>[3]</sup>. Also, with what president Biden emphasized in his State of the Union Message, the relationship between China and the United States represented as “seeking for competition, not conflict”<sup>[4]</sup>. Also, with what president Biden emphasized in his State of the Union Message, the relationship between China and the United States represented as “seeking for competition, not conflict” <sup>[5]</sup>. President Biden stated he would continue to invest in American industry and protect advanced technology. This seems to signal continuing economic disputes with China, which started with the Trump government. Joe Biden also accused China of expanding its influence in Asia and other violations in international society.

These statements are part of its untrust attitude towards the Chinese government. Considering both documents, the current American government's attitude towards China is very subtle: it contains historical concern on the ideology issue and threat of Chinese international influences. Meanwhile, the current United States government is

more likely to continue its economic and military power-building, also enforce its relationship with its Asia-Pacific allies. Such an attitude can be generally described as “hedging the bets”. The United States government does not want to fully present a hostile attitude toward China but still worrying about Chinese influence and those domestic issues. In the future, the United States government may still contain contact with the Chinese government, holding China and the United States relationship in a favorable position: neither friend nor enemy.

From both historical ideology concerns, the academic school of thought, and the actual government documents, the United States government is more likely to hesitate about China and the United States relationship future. The United States government may not fully trust the cooperation with the Chinese government. Motivated by the worry of communism and the Chinese government’s international influence, the United States may enforce its and its allies’ power in Asia to counter China. Meanwhile, the United States government will still try to keep in touch and have a normal relationship with the Chinese government.

### **3 The United States Policy Concern on China**

The diplomacy strategy the United States holds towards China can be described as two side policies: contain and contact. A Chinese scholar, Ling Shengli, proposed how the United States chooses different diplomatic attitudes depending on the trust and power distance between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. When the United States feels threatened by the Chinese influences and has less faith in the relationship, it will form a strong containment with weak friendly contact. In this concern, the United States is more likely to form NATO’s Asia-Pacification [6]. Based on the rising attention between the Chinese and United States governments, it fits into the scenario of strong containment with weak friendly contact. Starting from 1949, the United States will likely create certain containment towards the People’s Republic of China, causing disputes and serious conflicts. This section will focus more on the significant regional dispute issue affecting the relationship between the Chinese government and the United States.

The South China Sea is the primary conflict concern between China and the United States. One of the core conflicts between the Chinese government and the United States government started during the Chinese civil war. When the People’s Republic of China announced its establishment in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek and his government abandoned mainland China. They escaped to Taiwan island, which has also been called the Formosa. The United States previously supported the Republic of China as the legitimate government in the United Nations. Still, this support was broken by the People’s Republic of China got, committed as the only legitimate country of China. With the establishment of the formal relationship between the PRC and the U.S., the Chiang Kai-shek government lost its legitimacy worldwide. It could only exist as a local regime that the United States still supported in the South Asia Sea. Although the Biden administration is more likely to support the Taiwan regime, it still has to obey the “one China” policy agreement. Although the state’s secretary Blinken accused the Chinese government of

many violations, he still emphasized that the United States will still admit the One China policy and past agreements in his speech [7]. It can indeed be estimated that the United States in the short term will not directly pass through the red line of the one-China policy. Still, it is possible in the future with the rising conflict brought about by Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and the United States military aid to the Taiwan regime. Taiwan will still be a core issue and burden for the United States and China's foreign relations.

No matter what kind of attitude the Chinese government and the United States want to deal with their relationships, the Taiwan issue will always be one of the significant concerns between the two governments. The United States considers Taiwan a crucial strategic region in its strategy, and China considers Taiwan an unbreakable part of its sovereignty. This conflict will only be solved by the unification of the PRC or the United States, forcing the People's Republic of China to abandon this region.

Also, the United States, in its national strategy announcement, emphasizes the expansion of the cooperation with the local government in Taiwan [4]. This major conflict exists in the short-term relationship between the United States and China. It could still be the core issue that both governments must deal with in the future.

However, in public announcements, the recent Biden government has yet to form an aggressive strategy towards the Chinese government in Taiwan. One of the strategy documents affirms the United States will follow those past agreements with the Chinese government, but meanwhile, it will support Taiwan's "self-defense" right. In these concerns about regional disputes, the United States is more likely to hold a general relationship with the Chinese government. However, in the long-term consideration, Taiwan is another core problem in the Chinese-United States relationship. With rising tension between the Chinese and United States governments, the Taiwan issue will also be significantly considered in the United States Indo-Pacific strategy.

The nine-Line dash is another issue between the Chinese government and the ASEAN, which the United States also brought as a claim of how the Chinese government sabotages regional peace. Although in the past and recent years, the Chinese government holds a solid economic connection with the ASEAN members, there were disputes around the nine-Line dash in the South China Sea. ASEAN member states like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia had conflicts with the Chinese government [8]. From the United States point of view, this threatened its strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States national secretary Blinken also mentioned that the PRC government formed as a threat to the free trade and regional interaction in the Pacific region [9]. The United States can accuse the Chinese government of these disputes, whether in the future or the past. However, the cooperation wills from the ASEAN member states are likely lower than what the United States expects. As in the third section, this paper will be more specific about why the ASEAN can not be considered for transformation into NATO in Asia and why those countries are still willing to hold a friendly relationship with the Chinese government.

In these issues' concerns, the United States may have a greater interest in using these conflicts to expand its influences in the Indo-Pacific region, especially by referring to its "Free and open Indo-Pacific". The United States government is less willing to form an Asian NATO against the Chinese government directly, but with the concern on those

regional disputes, it will likely consider these conflicts as a threat to its interest in Asia and enforce its relationship with the Taiwan regime and the ASEAN member states.

#### **4 “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific”: How does the United States Consider its Allies in Asia?**

Starting from the last century, the United States should have considered its allies in Asia in a different position than those in Europe. In the past U.S. government’s evaluation, Asian allies usually lacked industry capability and enough national powers like those U.S. allies in Europe <sup>[10]</sup>. So the United States did not consider a multilateralism organization in Asia due to the weak national ability of its ally states in Asia had shown in before.

Another consideration is based on the cold war background. In the 1950s, the United States considered forming a regional defensive organization in Asia. However, the United States thought the Chinese government had greater autonomy in the communist group than the East European states <sup>[11]</sup>. Its conflict with the Soviet Union also made it less worried about the communist threat in Asia. This consideration made the United States not form another defensive organization or invite its Asian allies to NATO, which also leads the United States to hold a multiple sets of bilateral relations.

However, due to the rising conflict and distrust that the United States has in the Chinese government, the United States government is becoming more engaged with anti-Chinese influence affairs. For its close allies in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Japan and Australia, the United States government strongly supports its military development and engagement with NATO. These states represent parts of the state’s position in Asia. Other states and organizations in Asia also showed a much more complicated perspective and attitude toward China, such as ASEAN member states. These states do not follow up with the United States’ diplomatic strategy. Also, they showed a more complicated attitude in dealing with the relations with China and the United States.

##### **4.1 The United States and ASEAN**

In the U.S. national secretary Blinken speech on December 14, 2021, he stated the United States’ design of the Indo-Pacific region: “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific”. This means free access to international trade, voyages, and communication. In the speech, Blinken attacked China for interrupting the free voyage, sabotaging regional peace, and violating international law <sup>[9]</sup>. Blinken describes China as the cause of regional insecurity and a burden to the free economy. This is not the first time the United States has tried to sell its idea to ASEAN members.

However, ASEAN member states’ attitude toward clarifying their position is subtle. ASEAN member states all maintain a trading relationship with China. With the help of the One Belt, One Road initiative, China had more economical trading opportunities with ASEAN states. Starting from 2002, when ASEAN signed a free trade agreement with China, trade amount had increased enormously. Showing by the data in 2021, ASEAN’s trade with China increased from \$29 billion to \$669 billion. Meanwhile, the

United States had achieved \$364 billion <sup>[8]</sup>. From the economic comparison, it is clear that Beijing has a stronger economic interest with ASEAN states. The consideration of the economic issue for ASEAN members is apparent: should any of them blindly follow the United States and break the trade relationship with China, or should they hold their neutral position? From an economic perspective, the cost of damaging their relationship with China is high.

When Blinken spoke about the Chinese regional threat to Asia, the United States still not greatly involved into ASEAN states' domestic development. This issue made the United States' position less attractive to those states. When there is no exchange of interest, there is no cooperation. One of the scholars, Mahbubani, thinks that in the theory of "butter and guns", the Chinese government now became the "butter" to those ASEAN members, and the United States symbolizes the "guns", which made those ASEAN members more worried in its diplomatic position <sup>[8]</sup>.

With the tendency of deeper economic cooperation between ASEAN and China, it will be much more difficult for the United States government to enforce its relationship with ASEAN member states and make more states fall to the Chinese side in the China and U.S. competition in Asia.

Indeed, in June 2022, the United States and its G7 allies proposed "Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment". The document mentioned the infrastructure development and economic and maritime cooperation with ASEAN member states <sup>[12]</sup>. This grand plan is designed to counter the Chinese economic influence in the Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN. However, this plan only remains in the preliminary phase. For the United States, three major concerns must concern in the PGII plan -- how to coordinate enterprises in the actual developing strategies, how to persuade ASEAN states to abandon current cooperation with Chinese enterprises and government and stand with the United States, the United States domestic political instability that significantly impacts its foreign affairs decision-making <sup>[13]</sup>. Especially considering the upcoming 2024 elections and the debt ceiling issue, the success possibility of PGII is still unknown. Without solvencies that can deal with these major problems, the United States PGII plan seems difficult to be executed with ASEAN states.

## 4.2 United States and its Traditional Allies

Those states with United States military bases or strong connections with the U.S., such as Japan and Australia, will tend to enforce their relationship and cooperation with the United States. Especially considering that NATO planned on letting Japan, South Korea, and Australia into its partnership <sup>[14]</sup>. Also, NATO's newest strategy document emphasizes the concept of ideological encounter and focuses on the Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region <sup>[15]</sup>. These signals indicate that the United States and its European allies will be focusing on countering the Chinese government and trying to absorb more regional allies in Indo-Pacific. For states with a strong relationship with the United States, their government will be more likely to adopt a hostile position in dealing with its relationship with China and engage with the United States' defensive plan.

Here takes Australia as an example of those states. Starting from the Morrison government, Australia actively engaged with the United States' anti-China strategy <sup>[16]</sup>. The

Australian government was also involved in its military development, such as purchasing nuclear submarines. These actions broke their past normal relationship with the Chinese government. Now with the new cabinet of the Australian labor party, there is still no clear signal of fixing its relationship with the Chinese government back to the average level<sup>[16]</sup>.

Some states in the Indo-Pacific region faced a similar dilemma as Australia met: whether to actively engage with the United States' hostile position toward the Chinese government or try to hold a neutral position. This paper thinks it is a difficult task for those states like Australia to make the relationship with China to be warm up. When the United States is more likely to kidnap those states' political fields with hostility toward China, it is hard for those states' governments can hold a stable and healthy relationship with the Chinese government. In this consideration, states like Japan and Australia are still likely to be on board with the United States.

### 4.3 A New NATO in the Asia-Pacific Region?

Back into the general consideration, depending on the ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific states' willingness, is the United States able to develop a regional defensive organization? The answer this section concluded is no. First, this desire is constrained by its alliance strategy, which cannot gather all Allies to form a regional defense organization against China. Meanwhile, the invited countries have different strategic goals and great contradictions when facing each other. Therefore, it is impossible to form an integrated defensive alliance with a common strategic objective, just as with NATO. Indeed many states in the Indo-Pacific region have conflicts and disputes with the People's Republic of China, but they also have strong economic interaction with the PRC. They may agree on pressuring China with specific regional conflicts and disputes, but they will not directly form the same league against the Chinese government in international society.

Considering this, the United States is less likely to engage and form another new "NATO" in the Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile, its traditional allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia will be more actively engaged with the United States' strategy.

## 5 Conclusion

The United States no longer maintains a friendly relationship with China. Historical factors and the threat of today's China further heighten its suspicion of China. In America, a NATO-like grouping in the Asia-Pacific region is not feasible. Still, its traditional Allies, such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea, must be brought to its side as much as possible. Some recent US visits and statements have reinforced this signal of a hostile and defensive posture toward China, and NATO is perceived to be actively courting these Allies. ASEAN members are not explicitly on America's side of the game. As China's economic trade with ASEAN countries deepens in the future, ASEAN countries are less likely to join any organization or alliance that is openly hostile to China. It is also noticeable that ASEAN states may not develop a stronger relationship with China. The United States' strategy in the Indo-Pacific region is also crucial for those

states to be considered.

In summary, the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy will present a clear stance in the future: some Asia-Pacific countries will actively follow this diplomatic posture, while others, mainly ASEAN members, will reject some of the U.S. diplomatic statements and show a neutral attitude in the competition between China and the United States. America's dialogue calculus remains one of short-term harmonization and long-term containment. "Hedging" strategically, openly wooing others, and containing China tactically will be the national strategic and diplomatic stance of the United States for a long time to come. In conclusion, although there will not be a new "Asia NATO", the tendency of NATO's Asia-Pacificization still dramatically exists.

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