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Regional Security and Political Change in the Indo-Pacific: Major Powers, Institutional Responses, and Implications for International Cooperation

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Abstract

Asia is undergoing a prolonged phase of socio-political and geopolitical strategic volatility shaped by great-power rivalry, geo-economic fragmentation, technological weaponization, demographic transitions, and rapid military modernization. This article investigates the structural transformation of the Indo-Pacific security architecture through a comparative analysis of four pivotal Asian powers—China, India, Japan, and South Korea—their interactions with the United States, and the collective institutional responses of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Moving beyond conventional bipolar Cold War analogies, this study constructs a multi-theoretical framework integrating Realism, Complex Interdependence, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), and comparative federalist/consociational theories of decentralized order. The article demonstrates that contemporary regional security is governed by a structural paradox: deep, systemic economic and supply-chain interdependence coexists with zero-sum strategic distrust, creating acute security dilemmas, asymmetric vulnerabilities, and intersecting nuclear escalation dyads. The study further examines the socio-cultural and domestic political ramifications of transactional diplomacy in Southeast Asia and evaluates ASEAN's institutional capacity to maintain regional equilibrium. The paper concludes with theoretical implications for International Relations scholarship, policy recommendations for multilateral confidence-building, and directions for future research.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Balance of Power, Complex Interdependence, Regional Security Complex, ASEAN Centrality, Minilateralism, Nuclear Risks, Strategic Hedging, Federalism

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the decisive geopolitical crucible of twenty-first-century global politics. Spanning the maritime domain from the eastern coast of Africa to the Pacific littoral, the region accounts for over sixty percent of global population, nearly two-thirds of global economic output, and vital maritime trade arteries that sustain the international economic order. Unlike the rigid ideological bipolarity that characterized the Cold War, contemporary strategic tensions in Asia are multidimensional, non-linear, and accelerated by intersecting geopolitical, technological, geo-economic, and domestic socio-political transformations. The rise of China, the strategic ambitions of India, the remilitarization of Japan, and the geopolitical vulnerabilities of South Korea collectively shape an increasingly fragmented regional order, challenging the post-Cold War primacy of the West (Mahbubani, 2018). Simultaneously, the United States continues to function as the principal external balancing power in the Indo-Pacific (Kumar, 2024). The region's strategic volatility extends far beyond conventional territorial frictions and historical animosities. It increasingly manifests in critical supply-chain insecurity, cyber contestation, technological decoupling, weaponized trade interdependencies, maritime domain militarization, demographic transitions, and institutional friction (Ji, 2024; Ando, Hayakawa, & Kimura, 2024). These overlapping pressures have generated an intricate security environment wherein regional middle powers and developing states are forced to balance vital commercial ties with Beijing against essential security partnerships anchored by Washington.

Research Problem and Questions

While existing scholarship extensively catalogs individual bilateral tensions—such as the Taiwan Strait dispute, the Sino-Indian border dispute, or Korean Peninsula nuclearization—the regional security architecture lacks a unified

analytical paradigm explaining how systemic economic interdependence actively alters balance-of-power behavior rather than pacifying it. Many contemporary analyses treat institutional mechanisms and regional security architectures as purely reactive, underestimating how decentralized diplomatic arrangements operate to restrain great-power unilateralism. This article directly addresses this gap by investigating three core research questions: How do structural balance-of-power incentives and complex economic interdependencies interact to shape the strategic postures of China, India, Japan, and South Korea? Under what structural conditions does ASEAN's consensus-based institutional architecture succeed or fail in mitigating great-power competition and preventing regional fragmentation? What are the domestic political and socio-cultural consequences of transactional major-power diplomacy on Southeast Asian secondary and middle powers?

Overarching Argument and Contribution

This article advances the central proposition that the Indo-Pacific security order is characterized by structural entanglement: a condition where dense, asymmetric economic interdependence does not eradicate realist security dilemmas but instead raises the cost of conventional armed conflict while incentivizing below-threshold gray-zone coercion, economic statecraft, technological decoupling, and shifting minilateral alignments (Ji, 2024; Kumar, 2024). Consequently, the region is neither gravitating toward a stable multipolar equilibrium nor sliding inexorably into hegemonic war; rather, it is locking into an unstable, multi-layered institutional and deterrence configuration. This study contributes to international relations (IR) scholarship in three distinct ways: first, by empirically testing the intersection of Realism, Complex Interdependence, and Regional Security Complex Theory across comparative Asian case studies; second, by systematically evaluating the socio-cultural domestic disruptions caused by great-power transactional diplomacy in Southeast Asia (Murphy, 2017, 2021, 2024); and third, by pioneering the application of federalist and consociational political concepts to explain ASEAN's decentralized conflict-management mechanisms (Burgess, 2006; Kong, 2024, 2025c; Lijphart, 1969, 1979).

2. Theoretical Framework

To systematically evaluate the multidimensional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, this study constructs an integrative theoretical framework drawing on three established international relations traditions, complemented by federalist political thought.

(Theoretical Framework diagram remains unchanged)

Realism and Structural Balancing

Neorealism and offensive realism posit that the international system is structurally anarchic, compelling sovereign states to prioritize survival, maximize relative power, and prepare for competitive self-help (Mearsheimer, 2014; Zakaria, 2008). In the Indo-Pacific, realist logic clarifies: China’s assertive power projection, naval expansion, and pursuit of regional hegemony in East Asia; Counter-balancing alignments spearheaded by the United States and like-minded regional actors through bilateral alliances and minilateral groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS (Kumar, 2024); Japan’s defense normalization and India’s defensive military posture along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, realism alone fails to explain why profound security competition has not culminated in direct military conflict or why states maintain comprehensive commercial entanglements with their principal geopolitical rivals.

Complex Interdependence and Geo-Economic Statecraft

Complex Interdependence theory emphasizes that transnational ties, multiple channels of communication, and the absence of a rigid hierarchy among interstate issues alter the utility of military force (Ji, 2024). In Asia, economic interdependence does not merely promote peace as classical liberal theory envisions; instead, it generates weaponized interdependence. States exploit asymmetric vulnerabilities in semiconductor manufacturing, rare-earth supplies, and maritime choke points for geopolitical coercion (Ando et al., 2024). Complex interdependence explains why South Korea and Southeast Asian nations resist binary strategic alignments, striving instead to hedge against systemic economic dislocation.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Buzan and Wæver’s Regional Security Complex Theory provides the spatial framework for understanding how security dynamics operate at the regional level. An RSCT perspective posits that because threats travel more easily over short distances, security concerns cluster geographically. The Indo-Pacific represents a "super-complex" encompassing distinct yet intersecting sub-complexes: South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia. Developments in one sub-complex—such as China-India Himalayan standoffs or North Korean nuclear tests—reverberate immediately through the maritime arteries connecting the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

Federalist and Consociational Concepts of Order

While realism, complex interdependence, and RSCT treat sovereign nation-states as self-contained unitary actors, the history of political thought provides an additional explanatory lens: federalism. Grounded in the foundational principle of "self-rule and shared rule," federalist theory emphasizes contractual association, decentralized authority, and non-majoritarian dispute resolution among distinct political entities (Elazar, 1982, 1985, 1987, 1993). Contemporary scholarship differentiates between aggregative and holding-together frameworks, demonstrating how consociational pacts, mutual vetoes, and proportional representation resolve deep-seated conflicts in plural, fragmented polities (Burgess, 2006; Lijphart, 1969, 1979, 1980). When applied to international relations, federalist principles explain how loose institutional associations like ASEAN construct normative frameworks that constrain hegemonic domination through consensual, decentralized governance (Kong, 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

3. Methodology

This study uses a comparative case-study research design to examine regional security behavior, institutional adaptation, and geopolitical alignments across the Indo-Pacific.

Case Selection Rationale

Cases were selected across five distinct categories:

- **The Systemic Challenger:** The People's Republic of China (PRC), representing an aspiring regional hegemon pursuing revisionist maritime and territorial goals.
- **The Strategic Balancer:** India, representing an autonomous continental and maritime power navigating non-alignment while participating in minilateral balancing.
- **The Normalizing Frontline Allies:** Japan and South Korea, representing democratic U.S. treaty allies that face direct geographic threats from China and North Korea while maintaining distinct economic and diplomatic imperatives.
- **The Institutional Anchor:** ASEAN, representing a regional collective institutional platform striving to uphold normative centrality amid systemic polarization.
- **Secondary Frontline States:** The Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam, chosen to examine the domestic socio-political impacts of transactional diplomacy across diverse political regimes.

Analytical and Evidentiary Procedures

The inquiry evaluates each case using three standardized analytical criteria:

- **Balance-of-Power Actions:** Level of defense spending, military doctrine adjustments, weapon acquisitions, and alliance participation;
- **Economic Vulnerability & Hedging:** Exposure to supply-chain choke points, bilateral trade concentrations, and participation in mega-regional economic arrangements (such as RCEP and IPEF) (Ji, 2024; Ando et al., 2024);
- **Institutional and Diplomatic Adaptation:** Multilateral voting patterns, bilateral security treaties, and diplomatic crisis-management engagement.
  The evidence is derived from secondary scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, strategic research monographs, and primary institutional policy declarations. To minimize bias and ensure validity, findings were triangulated across regional perspectives (Chinese, American, Southeast Asian, and South Asian scholarship).

4. Major Powers and Strategic Behavior

(Strategic Matrix of Major Regional Actors table remains unchanged)

China: Revisionist Ambitions and Structural Constraints

Under the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing seeks regional primacy in East Asia, aiming to push American military presence beyond the first and second island chains, secure absolute control over maritime approaches, and achieve reunification with Taiwan (Allison, 2017; Sutter, 2021). Realist theory explains China’s naval expansion, hypersonic weapon development, and artificial island militarization in the South China Sea as structural power-maximization behavior (Mearsheimer, 2014; Kaplan, 2014). Simultaneously, complex interdependence highlights Beijing’s vulnerability. China’s economic growth remains intertwined with international capital markets, Western consumer demand, and critical technological imports, specifically advanced lithography equipment and high-end semiconductors. In response, China has implemented "dual circulation" economic strategies to insulate domestic markets while

increasing international dependence on Chinese industrial supply lines (Ando et al., 2024). Furthermore, China faces domestic headwinds: rapid demographic aging, real estate deflation, local government debt crises, and high youth unemployment. Historically, domestic economic deceleration can incentivize state leadership to weaponize nationalist foreign policy narratives to bolster regime legitimacy, increasing the likelihood of confrontation over Taiwan or contested maritime features (Brands & Gaddis, 2021). **This pursuit of regional hegemony directly creates the impetus for smaller states to seek collective shelter within a non-hierarchical, consensus-based framework like ASEAN, applying a federalist logic of "holding-together" against external pressure.**

India: Strategic Autonomy and Continental Balancing

India occupies a unique position as a rising Asian giant that resists formal military alliances while actively counter-balancing Chinese expansion (Pant, 2020). The bloody 2020 Galwan Valley clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh marked a structural turning point in Sino-Indian relations, forcing New Delhi to deploy substantial military assets northward and reassess its commercial relations with Beijing. From an RSCT perspective, India's security complex connects the South Asian continental theater directly with the wider Indo-Pacific maritime space. Realist balancing is visible in India's naval modernization across the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and its participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia (Kumar, 2024). The United States increasingly views India as a strategic counterweight to China and an essential Indo-Pacific partner (Kumar, 2024; Beeson, 2022). However, complex interdependence and historical non-alignment continue to condition Indian grand strategy: India maintains strong defense and energy partnerships with Russia, resisting Western pressure to isolate Moscow; India declined membership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to protect domestic manufacturing and agricultural sectors from Chinese import surges; India seeks technological cooperation through the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) while maintaining complete sovereignty over defense operational planning (Pant, 2020). **India's steadfast commitment to strategic autonomy reinforces the region's multipolar character, thereby legitimizing decentralized institutional arrangements that do not demand binding alliance commitments, a core feature of consociational order.**

Japan: Defensive Transformation and the End of Pacifist Restraint

Japan is undergoing its most comprehensive strategic and military transformation since the end of World War II (Green, 2022). Constrained by Article 9 of its post-war Constitution, Tokyo long maintained a strictly defensive defense posture. However, intensifying Chinese maritime incursions around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, recurrent North Korean ballistic missile tests, and the prospect of a kinetic contingency in the Taiwan Strait prompted a strategic reorientation. Under its updated National Security Strategy, Japan committed to doubling its defense budget toward two percent of gross domestic product (GDP), procuring long-range counter-strike capabilities (such as Tomahawk cruise missiles), and reorganizing its Self-Defense Forces under a unified joint operational command. Realism explains Tokyo's military modernization as external balancing against a revisionist neighbor. Yet, complex interdependence remains a core reality: China remains Japan's largest trading partner. Consequently, Tokyo combines defense deterrence with "economic security" policies designed to onshore semiconductor manufacturing and diversify critical mineral supply chains away from single-source suppliers (Ando et al., 2024). This strategic posture is further complicated by severe domestic demographic decline, which imposes rigid workforce constraints on military recruitment and fiscal policy. **Japan's simultaneous military normalization and deep economic entanglement with China underscore the non-binary nature of regional alignments, highlighting the need for institutional venues like ASEAN where strategic rivals can engage in dialogue—a key function of decentralized, power-sharing political systems.**

South Korea: Asymmetric Exposure and Strategic Straddling

The Republic of Korea (ROK) faces an acute balance-of-power and complex interdependence dilemma. Seoul is geographically exposed to an increasingly capable, nuclear-armed North Korea that has codified aggressive nuclear employment doctrines. Consequently, South Korea relies fundamentally on the U.S. nuclear umbrella and forward-deployed American troops for existential deterrence. Under the conservative administration of Yoon Suk-yeol, Seoul enhanced trilateral security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo—exemplified by the 2023 Camp David Accord—and embraced the "Global Pivotal State" doctrine, aligning its foreign policy rhetoric more closely with broader Indo-Pacific deterrence frameworks. Nevertheless, South Korea's economic architecture remains tethered to China, its largest bilateral trading partner and the consumer of a substantial share of its semiconductor outputs. Memories of Beijing's punishing economic retaliation following Seoul's 2017 deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system remain influential among South Korean policymakers. As a result, Seoul exercises caution regarding explicit security commitments in the Taiwan Strait, illustrating how complex economic dependencies constrain pure realist balancing. **This forces Seoul into a perpetual hedging posture that makes rigid, bloc-based security architectures untenable, thereby increasing the strategic value of loose, multilateral**

diplomatic forums that allow for flexible engagement, consistent with federalist principles of non-centralization.

5. Regional Fault Lines, Supply Chains, and Nuclear Risks

The intersection of major-power rivalries has exposed three volatile fault lines across the Indo-Pacific: economic supply-chain fragmentation, minilateral institutional proliferation, and escalating nuclear instability.

Supply Chain Decoupling and Geo-Economic Regionalism

Economic statecraft has transitioned from open multilateral integration toward targeted technological containment and "de-risking." The United States has enacted sweeping export controls on advanced artificial intelligence semiconductors and manufacturing equipment, complemented by industrial policies such as the CHIPS and Science Act and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) (Ji, 2024). These measures reflect the securitization of regional trade. As Ji (2024) demonstrates, regional economic architectures are increasingly weaponized to forge supply-chain alliances that isolate strategic competitors. Simultaneously, empirical analyses of East Asian production networks show that systemic decoupling faces severe economic friction (Ando et al., 2024). While final assembly lines for consumer electronics are shifting from China to Vietnam, India, and Malaysia, these secondary manufacturing nodes continue to rely heavily on intermediate parts and raw materials imported from China. Thus, rather than creating clean economic separation, supply-chain securitization has produced longer, more opaque supply routes that increase operational costs without eliminating systemic vulnerabilities (Ando et al., 2024; Ji, 2024).

Minilateralism versus Multilateralism

Frustrated by the consensus requirements of comprehensive regional institutions like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), the United States and its partners have constructed targeted minilateral coalitions:

- **The Quad (United States, Japan, India, Australia):** Focuses on maritime domain awareness, critical infrastructure, supply chains, and humanitarian assistance, serving as an informal balancing coalition (Kumar, 2024);
- **AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States):** A defense technology-sharing pact facilitating Australia's acquisition of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (Pillar I) and joint development of advanced capabilities, including quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic systems (Pillar II) (Kumar, 2024);
- **Trilateral Arrangements:** Deepening operational linkages between the U.S.-Japan-ROK and U.S.-Japan-Philippines.
  Beijing characterizes these arrangements as an "Indo-Pacific NATO" engineered to contain China's development (Sutter, 2021). The proliferation of minilateral groupings raises coordination costs, fragments regional diplomacy, and strains ASEAN's traditional institutional convening power.

Nuclear Risks in Asia

Asia contains multiple nuclear powers, including China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea (Radzinsky, 2018). Unlike the bilateral rivalry of the Cold War, the Asian nuclear landscape features overlapping and intersecting deterrence relationships. Several nuclear dyads exist simultaneously, some of which lack direct communication channels. This complexity increases the difficulty of crisis management and raises the risk of escalation through miscalculation or misperception. Several factors amplify these risks:

- Geographic proximity and contested borders, such as the Sino-Indian Himalayan frontier and the Line of Control in Kashmir, create conditions where conventional clashes could cross the nuclear threshold;
- The absence of institutionalized crisis communication mechanisms among several nuclear adversaries heightens the danger of unintended escalation (Khan, 2022);
- Doctrinal ambiguity regarding No First Use policies, launch authority, and early warning systems adds further uncertainty during periods of heightened tension.
  Consequently, a localized border skirmish, a naval incident, or even a false early warning could trigger escalatory dynamics that outpace diplomatic control. Managing these overlapping nuclear risks requires not only bilateral confidence-building measures but also multilateral crisis communication frameworks, for which existing regional institutions such as ASEAN remain ill equipped.

6. Transactional Diplomacy and Socio-Cultural Impacts in Southeast Asia

Beyond conventional military balancing, geopolitical stability in Asia is influenced by the transactional character of major-power diplomacy. The concept of transactional diplomacy refers to foreign policy engagements guided primarily

by immediate strategic utility, defense basing rights, and short-term economic concessions rather than durable normative commitments or sustainable societal development (Walt, 2018; Acharya, 2014). In Southeast Asia, where American and Chinese interests directly compete, major powers increasingly treat secondary states as strategic instruments within their geopolitical rivalry, generating domestic polarization and governance challenges (Shambaugh, 2020).

(Transactional Diplomacy in Southeast Asia table remains unchanged)

Country Case Studies

The Philippines: Militarization and Polarized Alignments

The Philippines exemplifies the volatile socio-political consequences of shifting external alignments. Under President Rodrigo Duterte, Manila pursued an aggressive accommodation of Beijing while threatening to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States. In contrast, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. re-embraced the U.S. alliance, granting U.S. forces expanded access to naval and air bases near Taiwan and the South China Sea under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) (Banlaoi, 2022). While this realignment has bolstered external deterrence against Chinese maritime coercion, it has sharpened domestic divisions. Nationalist and leftist civil-society groups argue that hosting foreign military installations exposes local communities to target risks in a regional great-power conflict. Concurrently, fluctuating external support has distorted domestic security development, encouraging reliance on foreign security assistance at the expense of comprehensive maritime self-reliance.

Thailand: Alliance Ambiguity and Democratic Volatility

Thailand demonstrates the complications of maintaining a formal treaty alliance devoid of shared normative values. Despite being designated a Major Non-NATO Ally of the United States, Bangkok's domestic politics have been defined by military interventions, royalist judicial interventions, and contested electoral mandates (Chachavalpongpun, 2020). During periods of Western criticism and statutory sanctions following military coups, Thai elites systematically deepened economic, diplomatic, and defense procurement ties with China. Transactional U.S. re-engagement—prioritizing base access and regional exercises like Cobra Gold while muting democratic governance concerns—has fostered societal skepticism toward external liberal rhetoric. This dynamic has reinforced elite-driven foreign policy decision-making that remains insulated from popular electoral accountability.

Indonesia: Safeguarding Non-Alignment and Resource Nationalism

As Southeast Asia's largest economy and the world's most populous Muslim-majority state, Indonesia maintains a commitment to its traditional *bebas dan aktif* ("independent and active") foreign policy (Laksmana, 2021). Jakarta views the Indo-Pacific concept with suspicion when framed as an adversarial coalition against China. Simultaneously, Indonesia faces challenges from Chinese incursions into its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the Natuna Islands. Indonesia has prioritized domestic industrialization through resource nationalism—such as mandatory domestic processing of nickel ores—securing extensive Chinese industrial investments while simultaneously acquiring Western defense hardware (Murphy, 2024). Indonesian elites resist overt great-power alignment, viewing foreign pressures to conform to external technological or ideological standards as challenges to national sovereignty and cultural autonomy.

Vietnam: Strategic Convergence without Ideological Alignment

Vietnam has cultivated deep diplomatic ties with the United States, culminating in the elevation of bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023. Hanoi relies on this relationship to counterbalance Chinese claims in the South China Sea. Yet, this partnership remains strictly transactional and pragmatic. Guided by its "Four No's" defense policy (no military alliances, no foreign military bases, no siding with one country against another, and no using force in international relations), the Communist Party of Vietnam maintains close party-to-party ties with Beijing and extensive historical defense procurement ties with Moscow. Vietnam seeks functional maritime balancing while guarding against ideological democratization pressures, demonstrating that strategic alignment in Southeast Asia does not equate to broader domestic institutional convergence.

Socio-Cultural Consequences of Strategic Competition

The systemic pressure to align with competing external powers generates societal disruptions across Southeast Asia. External competition frequently intensifies domestic elite fragmentation, encourages militarization of political discourse, and shifts state priorities away from social welfare and institutional reform toward geopolitical positioning (Murphy, 2017, 2021, 2024). These pressures manifest across three dimensions:

- **Politicization of National Identity:** Competing great powers cultivate domestic patronage networks, deepening divisions between pro-Western cosmopolitan elites and nationalist or traditionalist factions (Murphy, 2017).

- **Technological and Information Fragmentation:** Digital dependencies on competing Chinese (5G, digital platforms) and Western (cloud computing, AI models) infrastructure fragment regional public spheres, exacerbating state surveillance and information polarization.
- **Institutional Diversion:** Transactional security cooperation redirects limited national budgets into military modernization, diverting resources away from primary education, climate adaptation, and public health infrastructure (Murphy, 2021, 2024).

7. Institutional Responses: ASEAN and the Relevance of Federalist Theory

Amid these polarising dynamics, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faces structural constraints. Built upon the "ASEAN Way"—emphasizing consensus decision-making, national sovereignty, and non-interference—the organization struggles to forge unified positions when member states hold divergent threat perceptions regarding China.

(ASEAN Consensus vs. Great Power Competition diagram remains unchanged)

Institutional Decentralization and Federalist Principles

The above theories of realism, complex interdependence, and regional security complex all take sovereign states as the basic unit of analysis. There exists another theoretical tradition in the history of political thought: federalism. The core of federalism is the combination of "self-rule and shared rule," and political order can be built upon contracts, associations, and decentralized multi-level communities (Elazar, 1982, 1985, 1987, 1993). Contemporary federalism research distinguishes between "aggregative" and "holding-together" federalism, and explores the possibilities of non-territorial autonomy and consociational mechanisms as tools for conflict management (Burgess, 2006; Lijphart, 1969, 1979, 1980). Introducing this theoretical tradition into Indo-Pacific analysis helps to reveal: when regional actors (such as ASEAN) attempt to mitigate great power competition through multilateral dialogue and decentralized mechanisms, they are, in a limited sense, practicing certain principles of federalism (Kong, 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). By functioning as a consociational diplomatic community, ASEAN prevents the Indo-Pacific from organizing into rigid, binary military blocs. The requirement for internal consensus operates as a structural mechanism that denies any single great power unconstrained dominance over Southeast Asia's maritime and terrestrial commons. While critics cite the lack of supranational enforcement as an institutional weakness, federalist theory indicates that ASEAN's decentralized structure is what enables its survival within a highly competitive security environment.

8. Implications for the United States and Regional Order

The structural evolution of the Indo-Pacific carries implications for U.S. grand strategy:

- **The Risk of Strategic Overextension:** U.S. defense planners face simultaneous deterrence commitments across Europe (deterring Russian aggression), the Middle East (securing maritime trade routes and managing regional escalations), and the Indo-Pacific (balancing Chinese power). Given defense-industrial manufacturing constraints, sustaining deterrence across three distant theaters risks overstretching logistics and operational capacity, potentially threatening the stability of the American-led world order (Ikenberry, 2011).
- **Limits of Coercive Economic Decoupling:** Southeast and South Asian states will not join an exclusionary economic coalition designed to isolate Beijing. Washington’s reluctance to rejoin binding regional trade pacts (such as the CPTPP) leaves regional economies reliant on Chinese commercial ties, limiting the strategic reach of non-binding initiatives like the IPEF (Ji, 2024; Ando et al., 2024).
- **Escalation Vulnerabilities:** The intersection of unresolved territorial flashpoints (Taiwan, South China Sea, Sino-Indian border) with overlapping nuclear dyads significantly increases the risk that tactical incidents could escalate into wider strategic conflicts (Khan, 2022; Radzinsky, 2018).

9. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Synthesis of Findings

This study has examined the transforming Indo-Pacific security architecture through an integrated theoretical framework. The analysis confirms that Asia’s regional order is characterized by structural entanglement:

- Realist balancing incentives drive significant military buildups across China, India, Japan, and U.S.-led minilateral coalitions (Kumar, 2024);
- Complex interdependence sustains critical economic, technology, and supply-chain linkages, constraining states from executing wholesale economic disengagement (Ando et al., 2024; Ji, 2024);
- Overlapping nuclear dyads and geographic flashpoints produce systemic crisis-management risks (Khan, 2022; Radzinsky, 2018);

- Transactional great-power diplomacy generates domestic polarization, democratic friction, and elite fragmentation within Southeast Asian secondary powers (Murphy, 2017, 2021, 2024);
- Applying federalist and consociational frameworks demonstrates how decentralized institutional structures can restrain hegemon-led bloc consolidation and sustain multilateral engagement (Burgess, 2006; Kong, 2024, 2025c; Lijphart, 1979).

Policy Recommendations

- **Institutionalize Multilateral Risk-Reduction Mechanisms:** The United States, China, India, and Pakistan should establish institutionalized crisis-communication centers, automated military deconfliction hotlines, and standardized rules for maritime encounters to prevent tactical clashes from escalating across nuclear thresholds (Khan, 2022).
- **Transition from Transactional Security to Developmental Partnerships:** Major external powers must move beyond short-term basing arrangements and security transactionalism. Sustainable influence requires investing in public health, green energy infrastructure, climate adaptation, and institutional capacity-building (Murphy, 2021, 2024).
- **Support ASEAN-Led Consociational Platforms:** Rather than superseding ASEAN mechanisms with minilateral configurations, external powers should reinforce ASEAN-centered dialogues (such as the East Asia Summit and ADMM-Plus). Decentralized, consensus-driven platforms remain essential for maintaining open channels of communication among strategic adversaries (Kong, 2025c).
- **Advance Multilateral Economic Integration:** The United States should transition beyond voluntary, non-binding frameworks like the IPEF and pursue comprehensive market access initiatives that offer viable, diversified commercial alternatives for developing regional economies (Ji, 2024).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study relied primarily on secondary literature, comparative institutional analysis, and strategic policy assessments. Future research should pursue:

- Quantitative modeling of supply-chain diversion networks using firm-level customs data;
- Empirical survey methodologies evaluating elite and public threat perceptions across Southeast and South Asian populations;
- In-depth studies exploring the applicability of federalist concepts—such as asymmetric autonomy and consociational governance—to specific multilateral security regimes in the developing world.

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