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**EMERGING SECURITY ORDER IN THE
INDO-PACIFIC: CAMBODIA'S RESPONSE
AND POLICY CHOICES IN AN ERA OF
U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION**

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Emerging Security Order in the Indo-Pacific: Cambodia's Response and Policy Choices in an Era of U.S.-China Competition

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Abstract

Since the end of World War II, the security order in the Asia-Pacific has centered around U.S.-led partnerships and alliances, known as the hub-and-spokes. Under the Trump administration, the U.S. adopted the Indo-Pacific strategy, aimed at countering China's growing dominance and influence in the region. This rivalry has led to new security arrangements, or minilateral groupings, such as AUKUS and QUAD, with the U.S. promoting the hub-and-spokes as the 'new convergence' concept. Cambodia, a small nation in Southeast Asia, faces existential challenges in balancing relations with both powers. The U.S. allegations regarding the Ream Naval Base modernization reflect these challenges. Despite this, Cambodia fully supports ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which is based on inclusiveness and centrality. Cambodia adheres to the principles of peaceful coexistence and a neutral foreign policy in navigating this complex security environment.

Introduction

In 2011, President Obama delivered a landmark address to the joint sitting of the Australian parliament, outlining America's commitment to expanding its influence in the Asia-Pacific region and reaffirming its status as a preeminent power. This move came amidst Beijing's increasing influence and challenge to the existing order, as well as American hegemonic domination in the region. President Barack Obama emphasized, "The United States is a Pacific Power, and we are here to stay".¹ Notably, his speech coincided with the announcement of sending 2,500 U.S. Marines to be semi-permanently based and trained in Darwin, tasked with protecting American interests across the region.

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¹ "Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament", *The White House*, 17 November 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

A week prior to Obama's trip, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton penned an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine titled "America's Pacific Century," signaling a shift in American policy to position itself as a sustaining leader, securing interests, and advancing values amid U.S. disengagement in Iraq and Afghanistan.² Secretary Clinton articulated the so-called "Pivot to Asia" strategy, which underscored the U.S. commitment to upholding peace and security in the Asia-Pacific by defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, countering North Korea's nuclear proliferation, and ensuring transparency in the military activities of the region's major actors.³ She outlined six key courses of action, including reinvigorating alliances, cultivating relationships with rising powers, developing ties with regional multilateral bodies, closely engaging with Southeast Asian countries, establishing a broad-based military presence in Asia, and promoting democracy and human rights.⁴ The pivot, which later evolved into a "rebalance" after six months, encompassed not only military actions and deployments but also introduced a new strategic region to the world the "Indo-Pacific".⁵

The United States has been actively engaged in the Indo-Pacific region for over two centuries, beginning with its early relationships with China. In 1784, shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the U.S. dispatched the trading ship, the *Empress of China*, to establish commercial ties with China.⁶ Subsequently, in 1817, the U.S. Congress approved the first full-time Pacific deployment of a U.S. warship, marking the beginning of diplomatic relations with Thailand. Furthermore, the U.S. successfully negotiated the opening of Japan to the global trading system in 1853, through what became known as "the American imperial project in Asia" and Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy in Tokyo harbor.⁷

By the 1890s, Alfred Mahan, the President of the U.S. Naval War College, drew upon Britain's success in becoming a global power to argue that for the United States to thrive, it needed to acquire overseas marketplaces and secure trading routes through a network of naval bases.⁸ This vision played a crucial role in shaping the U.S. foreign policy. The United States' ascent to major power status was significantly

² Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

³ Clinton, "America's Pacific Century".

⁴ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 200.

⁵ Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 200-01.

⁶ "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report", *The US Department of Defense*, 11 December 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

⁷ Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 48-49.

⁸ Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 48-49.

propelled by its victory over another great power, Spain, in 1898. This victory led to the annexation of the Philippines, Hawaii, and Guam, consolidating “the United States' position as a true Pacific Power”.⁹

The Indo-Pacific rose to prominence during the early years of the Trump administration. However, the concept of the two oceans converging gained attention when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament in 2007, highlighting the ancient Asian geographical vision known as the “Confluence of the Two Seas”. It wasn't until almost a decade later, in August 2016, that Prime Minister Abe announced the Vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which resonated with the U.S. a year later. The United States changed its geographical definition soon after President Trump officially announced “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP)” in 2017, in Da Nang Vietnam, and then adjusted geographical definition in its military structure by renaming USPACOM as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (Indo-PACOM).¹⁰

In October 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivered remarks on the “defining relationship with India for the next century”. He emphasized how the Pacific and Indian Oceans have connected both countries for centuries, and the Indo-Pacific, as a region of shared history and future, must remain free and open.¹¹ Many observers perceive that the underlying aim of establishing the Indo-Pacific region is to incorporate India into the new security arrangement alongside the U.S. and Japan. This move sets an example of the combined strength of the three Indo-Pacific democracies and their like-minded partners to counter China's influence in the region. India, designated as a “Major Defense Partner” by the U.S. Congress in 2016, plays a pivotal role in global security and stability, contributing to the protection of the global commons.¹² In 2017, the navies of the U.S., Japan, and India conducted joint exercises (MALABAR), the largest of their kind for the first time in the Indian Ocean. This exercise demonstrated the clear example of the “combined strength of the three Indo-Pacific democracies”.¹³

Given the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, the security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific is becoming increasingly perilous, potentially leading to a zero-sum competition and an escalating spiral of security conflict. At Anchorage Summit, Alaska, in 2021, Jake Sullivan, Biden’s National Security Adviser, said “the U.S.-China relationships will be competitive where it should be, collaborative where it can be,

⁹ Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 48-49.

¹⁰ Wada Haruko, “The Indo-Pacific Concept: Geographical Adjustments and Their Implications.” *NTU RSIS Working Paper* 1-6, no. 326 (2020): 3-4. <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10356/143604/2/WP326.pdf>

¹¹ Rex Tillerson, “Defining our relationship with India for the next century,” *CSIS*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson>.

¹² Tillerson, “Defining our relationship with India for the next century”.

¹³ Tillerson, “Defining our relationship with India for the next century”.

adversarial where it must be".¹⁴ And, following the Biden-Xi meetings in Bali and San Francisco, both Washington and Beijing have expressed their desire to avoid conflict. At the San Francisco meeting in November 2023, President Xi Jinping emphasized that "the planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed," while President Biden stated, "We must ensure that competition does not escalate into conflict".¹⁵ Despite concerns among many scholars about the onset of a new Cold War between the two superpowers, President Biden reassured reporters after the Bali Xi-Biden meeting that "there is no need to worry about a new Cold War between the United States and China".¹⁶

This paper aims to delineate the emerging security order in the Indo-Pacific while scrutinizing the impact of the U.S.-China rivalry on peace and security in the region, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia. Additionally, it analyzes Cambodia's response to the evolving security environment, threats, and future developments in the era of U.S.-China competition. It examines how Cambodia aims to safeguard its core interests while promoting peace, stability, and prosperity. This study aims to provide answers to the questions raised through a content analysis of relevant documents and literature, such as speeches, news headlines, as well as government documents, initiatives, and practices, have been systematically assessed for this endeavor. In addition, expert interviews including university professors, diplomats, politicians, and government officials have been conducted.

New security order in the Indo-Pacific

The United States considers itself as an Indo-Pacific power and has long recognized the Indo-Pacific as "the world's center of gravity," crucial to its security and prosperity.¹⁷ However, the rise of China's influence in the region has challenged U.S. primacy across multiple domains, including military, political, economic, and technological spheres. In the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy, the Biden's administration underscores the imperative of competition with China, stating, "Competition with the PRC is most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific, but it is increasingly global. It's clear that the next ten

¹⁴ Jake Sullivan, "Remark at Top Meeting in Anchorage, Alaska," *U.S. Department of State*, 18 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-chinese-director-of-the-office-of-the-central-commission-for-foreign-affairs-yang-jiechi-and-chinese-state-councilor-wang-yi-at-th/>.

¹⁵ Evelyn Cheng, "Earth is 'Big enough' for U.S. and China to succeed, Xi says as he meets Biden," *CNBC*, 15 November 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/11/15/xi-biden-at-apec-summit-china-us-leaders-meet-in-san-francisco.html#:~:text=he%20meets%20Biden-,Earth%20is%20'big%20enough'%20for%20U.S.%20and%20China%20to%20succeed,says%20as%20he%20meets%20Biden&text=President%20Joe%20Bid.>

¹⁶ "Top takeaways from the Biden-Xi meeting in Bali," *Reuters*, 14 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/top-takeaways-biden-xi-meeting-bali-2022-11-14/>.

¹⁷ "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," *The White House*, February 2022, 4-5. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

years will be the decisive period. We stand now at the inflection point, where the choices we make and the priorities we pursue today will set us on a course that determines our competitive position long into the future".¹⁸

Despite the end of the Cold War, the United States has maintained a significant military presence in the region.¹⁹ through numerous military bases all over the world, including some 400 bases with 300,000 deployed troop in the Pacific region alone. The existing security architecture in Asia-Pacific has been anchored upon bilateral, U.S.-led security alliances and partnerships, often referred to as "the hub-and-spokes" system. In this framework, the United States stands at the center, with its allies such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand acting as spokes. Additionally, the U.S. has engaged in security partnerships with countries like Singapore and India.²⁰

We are now living in a multipolar world, where there are three great powers in the system, namely the United States, PRC, and Russia, and Russia is a distant great power compared to the other two. As the world enters into the politics of great powers. America sees China as a potential competitor, an adversary, and a threat; a threat to its regional domination. With remarkable economic growth and technological advancement, China has risen to be another pole in the system and the region, to the point of weakening American hegemony. In recent years, there have been increasing negative views of China among American citizens. New Pew Research Center survey showed "Americans view China as the greatest threats facing their nation".²¹

Many observers agree that China is the only country that possesses the means, capability and might to challenge the U.S. With its 1.4 billion population and impressive economic growth, China could potentially push for stronger military defense to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity including the South China Sea based on the so-called "nine-dash line". According to the CNN report, China has built the world largest naval fleet, more than 340 warships, and revealed its ambition for blue-navy capability, and until recently it has been considered as a green-water navy, operating mostly

¹⁸ "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States", 24.

¹⁹ "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States", 4-5.

²⁰ Felix Heiduk, "Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Asianisation of the regional security architecture," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)* SWP Research Paper 11: 7-10 (2022), doi:10.18449/2022RP11.

²¹ Nam Lam & Silver Laura, "Americans name China as the country posing the greatest threat to the U.S.," *Pew Research*, n.d., <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/27/americans-name-china-as-the-country-posing-the-greatest-threat-to-the-us/>.

near seas.²² Beijing also used economic leverage, influenced operations, and “implied military threats to persuade other states to comply with its agenda,” while seeking “regional hegemony” as a prelude to “global preeminence” over the long term.²³

Recently, the CIA director William Burns named China “the biggest long-term threat,” while doubling its spy agency budget for countering China. According to Burns, the post-Cold War period ended the moment Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and the world is at the early stage of a new Cold War, with the CIA establishing a spy special center focusing on anti-China missions.²⁴ Burns expressed “China’s rise and Russia’s revanchism pose daunting geopolitical challenges in a world of intense strategic competition, in which the United States no longer enjoys uncontested primacy. China remains the only U.S. rival with both the intent to reshape the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so”.²⁵

At the recent Munich Security Conference on March 17, 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated, “The international system today is under serious strain from unilateralism and (big) power politics”.²⁶ Perhaps the best explanation of great power politics comes from Professor John Mearsheimer, who believed, “If China continues its impressive economic growth, in the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war. America is likely to behave toward China much the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War”.²⁷ Professor Mearsheimer's theory of international politics suggests that the “mightiest state attempts to establish hegemony in its region of the world, while making sure that no rival great power dominates another region”.²⁸ This theory reflects U.S. foreign policy and its behavior towards its peer competitors since its independence as a nation. As evident, the U.S. achieved victory over

²² Brad Lendon and Simone McCarthy, “Blue-water ambitions: Is China looking beyond its neighborhood now it has the world’s largest navy?,” *CNN*, 2 September 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/01/asia/china-navy-overseas-military-bases-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

²³ Michael D. Swaine, “Creating an Unstable Asia: the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Carnegie Endowment*, 2 March 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/03/creating-an-unstable-asia-the-us-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy?lang=en>.

²⁴ Ben Norton, “CIA director calls China biggest ‘threat’, says Ukraine war benefits US geopolitically and economically,” *Geopolitical Economy*, 7 February 2024, <https://geopoliticeconomy.com/2024/02/07/cia-director-china-threat-russia-ukraine-war/>.

²⁵ Norton, “CIA director calls China biggest ‘threat’, says Ukraine war benefits US geopolitically and economically”.

²⁶ Wang Yi, “China in the World,” *Munich Security Conference*, 17 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/live/UeQRR4bWf9g?si=cfhqFUaOKrce6q0>.

²⁷ Jonh J. Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise.” *Current History*, April 2006, 160-161.

²⁸ Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise”, 160.

mighty Spain, defeated Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan in the first and second world wars, and emerged victorious over the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

The U.S.-China relationship is the most consequential bilateral relationship in the world today. However, the relationship between these two great powers has been deteriorating due to many irreconcilable issues and a deep mistrust between them. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for both sides to come to good terms and establish a modus operandi at least in the foreseeable future. From the Chinese perspective, America is attempting to contain China, suppress its peaceful rise, and deny its rightful place in the world. The Trump administration viewed China as a revisionist power and emphasized competition with China in politics, economics, and military matters and is the cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific policy.

From Washington's perception, China sought to reshape the region's security architecture to favor its terms while undermining the U.S.' hegemonic position in the region.²⁹ The increasing "Chinese revisionism" had to be met with deterrence and containment.³⁰ Under Biden, "free trade" is also part of the vision of a "free and open" Indo-Pacific. That "free and sovereign" states should be the general norm is reflected in statements by the Biden administration, as reference to transparency and the rule of law, peaceful conflict resolution and freedom of navigation.³¹ Swaine (2018) argued "Like National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS) summary inexplicably depicts FOIP as both an all-inclusive vision for regional prosperity and security, and a networked security architecture of allies and partners directed at China".³²

Primarily, the current security order, based on U.S.-led alliances and bilateral partnerships, still plays pivotal roles in the Asian strategic architecture. However, these alliances have evolved into new formats that require allies and partners like Japan and Australia to shoulder a "bigger share of the security burden".³³ The U.S.-China geostrategic competition has resulted in new security arrangements

²⁹ Heiduk, "Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Asianisation of the regional security architecture," 12-13.

³⁰ Mike Pence, "Remarks on the Administration's policy toward China," *White House*, 4 October 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>.

³¹ Lloyd J. Austin, "Remarks at the 40th Fullerton Lecture," *The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS)*, 27 July 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/en/podcasts/sounds-strategic/2021/07/40th-fullerton-lecture-us-secretary-of-defense-austin/>.

³² Austin, "Remarks at the 40th Fullerton Lecture"; Swaine, "Creating an Unstable Asia: the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy".

³³ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Explaining the Rise of Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific," *ORF Online*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/explaining-the-rise-of-minilaterals-in-the-indo-pacific>.

in the form of minilateral groupings.³⁴ such as the security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA (AUKUS), and the revived strategic dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the USA (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, “Quad”).³⁵ Secretary Blinken stated that the core function of the regional security architecture is therefore to preserve a free, open Indo-Pacific under the leadership of the USA, in which the region's states can act freely, both politically and economically, and without external coercion.³⁶

The narrative of the Indo-Pacific Strategy revolves around the concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”. The strategy aims to collaborate with like-minded allies and partners whose interests and values align with those of the United States in the region, distinct from China's. Given the evolving security threats in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. has determined to bolster Indo-Pacific security through the adoption of an “integrated deterrence” strategy.³⁷ This involves enhancing trilateral partnerships with Australia and the United Kingdom (AUKUS) in upholding the international rules-based order and diplomacy.³⁸ AUKUS' primary focus is the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific, where China's rise threatens the existing regional order led by the United States.³⁹

Established in 2021, AUKUS serves as a strategic partnership aimed at deepening defense cooperation among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with the goal of strengthening “their allied deterrence and defense capabilities in the Indo-Pacific”.⁴⁰ Under this defense pact, AUKUS members have agreed to collaborate on advanced technology and information sharing; moreover, the United States and the United Kingdom are assisting Australia in overhauling its naval capabilities by acquiring and developing conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines.⁴¹

Likewise, the other U.S.-led minilateral grouping, the Quad, has been revived and recognized as a vital building block in the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific aimed at robustly competing with China. Since its first meeting in May 2007, the Quad then fell into dormancy until its renewal in November

³⁴ Rajagopalan, “Explaining the Rise of Minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific”.

³⁵ Heiduk, “Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Asianisation of the regional security architecture” 5-6.

³⁶ Antony Blinken, “Remarks on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” *U.S. Embassy in Cambodia*, 14 December 2021, <https://kh.usembassy.gov/secretary-blinkens-remarks-on-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

³⁷ Blinken, “Remarks on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

³⁸ Blinken, “Remarks on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

³⁹ Yatharth Kachiar and Priya ViJaykumar PooJary, “AUKUS? Quad? FOIP? A fragmented approach cannot counter China,” *Lowy Institute*, 27 October 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aukus-quad-foip-fragmented-approach-cannot-counter-china>.

⁴⁰ Lauren Kahn, “AUKUS Explained: How Will the Trilateral Pact Shape Indo-Pacific Security?,” *CFR*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/aukus-explained-how-will-trilateral-pact-shape-indo-pacific-security>.

⁴¹ Kahn, “AUKUS Explained: How Will the Trilateral Pact Shape Indo-Pacific Security?”.

2017, which piqued Chinese interests and was schemed to employ a Cold War-style scenario to strategically build an arc around China by adding India as a member.⁴² Chinese top diplomat Wang Yi has portrayed the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy as a byword for bloc politics and called the AUKUS military alliance and Quad formation the “Indo-Pacific version of NATO” that targets China.⁴³ In a recent speech to Chinese leaders, President Xi Jinping openly lambasted “U.S.-led Western countries” for their pursuit to “contain, encircle, and suppress” China.⁴⁴ However, Chheang Vannarith, former President of Cambodia Think-tank AVI, sighed “The U.S is trying to contain or constraint China. But it seems impossible because China is too powerful for the U.S. to contain or encircle”.⁴⁵

According to Dr. Wuthnow, senior research fellow at National Defense University, if America were in fact employing a containment strategy, China would encounter pressure both on its eastern frontier, where Japan occupied key positions on the first island chain, and increasingly along its southern and western flanks.⁴⁶ Under the Biden administration, the bolstering of the Quad and its possible expansion as a tool of “military deterrence” is also high on the agenda.⁴⁷ Increasing military interoperability among the Quad members is crucial for the grouping, which aims to position itself as a buttress for security in the region and uphold the principles of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, as demonstrated in the recent Malabar exercise off the coast of Guam. In addition to strengthening the Quad and AUKUS, and deepening its regional treaty alliances, Australia, Japan, the ROK, the Philippines, and Thailand.⁴⁸ Washington has shown significant interest in forging new and revitalized partnerships and initiatives. These include vital new trilaterals, namely the U.S., Japan, and South Korea, as well as the U.S., South Korea, and India.⁴⁹ At the same time, Washington has sought to strengthen relationships with leading regional partners including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia,

⁴² Joel Wuthnow, “China’s shifting attitude on the Indo-Pacific Quad,” *War On The Rocks*, 7 April 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/CHINAS-SHIFTING-ATTITUDE-ON-THE-INDO-PACIFIC-QUAD/>.

⁴³ Wuthnow, “China’s shifting attitude on the Indo-Pacific Quad”.

⁴⁴ “China’s Response to the Quad”, *Asia Society*, 16 May 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/chinas-response-quad>.

⁴⁵ Chheang Vannarith (Chairman, Angkor Social Innovation Park, and Former President, AVI), in discussion with the author, February 2024.

⁴⁶ Wuthnow, “China’s shifting attitude on the Indo-Pacific Quad”.

⁴⁷ Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, “How America Can Shore Up Asian Order: A Strategy for Restoring Balance and Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 12 January 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/United-states/2021-01-12/how-america-can-shore-asian-order>.

⁴⁸ “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”, 9.

⁴⁹ “Report of the Experts Study Group on NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners”, *United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, 19 February 2024, 22-23.

New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands.⁵⁰ as well as upgrading its relations with ASEAN into a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”.⁵¹

Besides, the security environment in the Indo-Pacific is becoming highly volatile and intertwined due to NATO’s expansion and increasing focus on the security challenges posed by China. NATO is convinced that Russia and China are “two faces of the same autocratic coin”.⁵² A notable illustration of China’s challenge to NATO occurred when China and Russia elevated their relationship to the level of “partners with no limits”, whilst China has helped Russia cushion Western economic and political pressure.⁵³ The conflict in Ukraine has compelled NATO’s members to be more unified, cohesive, and robust than ever before, and has fundamentally reshaped the scope and future of NATO’s dynamics and awareness of the Indo-Pacific region. During the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO acknowledged China’s and Russia’s efforts to undermine the rules-based international order, which directly challenges NATO’s values and interests.⁵⁴

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO Leaders urged China to “condemn Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, refrain from supporting Russia’s military efforts, stop amplifying Russia’s false narrative blaming Ukraine and NATO for the conflict, and adhere to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter”.⁵⁵ Indeed, NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept emphasized the imperative of collective action among allies to “address the systematic challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security and ensure NATO’s enduring ability to guarantee the defense and security of its members. We will enhance our shared awareness, resilience, and preparedness, and defend against the PRC’s coercive tactics and attempts to divide the Alliance. We will uphold our shared values and the rules-based international order, including the principle of freedom of navigation”.⁵⁶

In the past few years, the relations between NATO and four partner countries in the Indo-Pacific (known as IP4), namely Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, have gained momentum due

⁵⁰ “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”, 9-10.

⁵¹ Carla Freeman et al., “Two Years Later, What Has the Indo-Pacific Strategy Achieved?,” *United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/two-years-later-what-has-indo-pacific-strategy-achieved>.

⁵² Mathieu Droin, “Nato’s Future in the Indo-Pacific: Tilt or Jilt?,” *9 Dash Line*, 9 September 2023, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/natos-future-in-the-indo-pacific-tilt-or-jilt>.

⁵³ Luis Simón, “NATO’s China and Indo-Pacific conundrum,” *NATO*, 22 November 2023, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/11/22/natos-china-and-indo-pacific-conundrum/index.html>.

⁵⁴ Simón, “NATO’s China and Indo-Pacific conundrum”.

⁵⁵ Simón, “NATO’s China and Indo-Pacific conundrum”.

⁵⁶ “2022 NATO Strategic Concept”, *NATO*, 29 June 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm.

to their growing awareness of security and strategic challenges posed by China and Russia.⁵⁷ In an effort to engage with partner countries in the region, there was an attempt to open a NATO liaison office in Tokyo, which would facilitate NATO's engagement with IP4 countries on issues of cyber, maritime security, space, emerging and disruptive technologies, disinformation, climate change, and resilience.⁵⁸ NATO and its partners have keenly taken on the strategic challenges posed by a more assertive China and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as underscored by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg "What happens in Europe matters for Asia, for the Indo-Pacific, and what happens in Asia and the Indo-Pacific matters for Europe".⁵⁹ Concerning NATO's engagement in Asia, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said "NATO only exists in the West, and now it seems to be involved in the Asia-Pacific region in various activities, bringing concerns for ASEAN".⁶⁰

The Defense Alliance consists of 32 member countries from Europe and North America, collectively accounting for 50 percent of the world's economy and military might. Recently, Sweden formally became the newest member of NATO, in which U.S. President Joe Biden's expression of his support for the expansion of the military alliance as "the shield against aggression and fear of aggression".⁶¹ NATO has recognized the growing competition and rivalry between the U.S. and China, as well as the increasing closeness between Russia and China. NATO was further aggravated by the fact that not only did China fail to condemn Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, but it also helped prop up Russia's economy in a time of war. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated, "Many NATO allies are concerned about China. Security is not regional; security is global. And today it's Ukraine; tomorrow it can be Taiwan".⁶²

This year marks the 75th anniversary of NATO. In the upcoming NATO Summit in Washington this July, there is a need for the Alliance to stand together and deepen ties with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific to address common security concerns. The U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said, "It is not about bringing NATO to Asia. It is about working together with like-minded partners in

⁵⁷ "Report of the Experts Study Group on NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners", 31.

⁵⁸ Mirna Galic, "What's Behind NATO's Tightening Ties with its Indo-Pacific Partners?," *United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, 6 July 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/whats-behind-natos-tightening-ties-its-indo-pacific-partners>.

⁵⁹ Galic, "What's Behind NATO's Tightening Ties with its Indo-Pacific Partners?"

⁶⁰ "Quad, AUKUS and NATO in Asia-Pacific: An open challenge to ASEAN centrality", *CGTN*, 17 June 2023, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501309560/quad-aukus-and-nato-in-asia-pacific-an-open-challenge-to-asean-centrality/>.

⁶¹ "China easing tensions for Ukraine vs US pursuing bloc politics", *Global Times*, 8 March 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1308494.shtml>.

⁶² "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a Joint Press Availability", *U.S. Department of State*, 29 January 2024, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-nato-secretary-general-jens-stoltenberg-at-a-joint-press-availability-3/>.

the Indo-Pacific on challenges that transcend geography, such as cyber, economic security, nuclear proliferation, and the evolving interconnections between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, among other issues".⁶³ NATO's primary mission is deterrence and defense, and should any adversary challenge that deterrent, as the U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin put it, "the Alliance is ready to fight and to win".⁶⁴ In the coming years, the security environment in the Indo-Pacific is becoming more unpredictable and dangerous, with various players having interests in the region amid the rivalry between the U.S. and China. The security architecture in this region will revolve around major power politics, bloc politics, and a zero-sum game.

Security Concerns in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is geographically located in the midst of two great oceans: the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Positioned at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, Southeast Asia encompasses several hotspots, including the South China Sea Conflict, East China Sea Dispute, Korean Peninsula Crisis, Taiwan Crisis, and the India-China Border Conflict. Situated between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Southeast Asia finds itself at the nexus of these challenges. Among these flashpoints, the complex territorial disputes in the South China Sea are particularly notable, representing a focal point of intense rivalry and posing significant challenges to regional security and order.

Strategically located at the center of the Indo-Pacific region, Southeast Asia has the regional grouping ASEAN considered paramount in the promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. The United States aims to deepen its longstanding cooperation with ASEAN on issues of mutual interest and explore opportunities for engaging the Quad and ASEAN.⁶⁵ However, the competition between the U.S. and China is a source of concern for countries in the region, posing security challenges and threatening regional stability in Southeast Asia. This includes the potential for conflict across disputed maritime borders in the South China Sea, an escalating nuclear and arms race, division within the regional bloc, and the emergence of proxy conflicts. The U.S. does not pressure ASEAN member countries to choose but instead respects ASEAN centrality. It encourages ASEAN to be an important partner in the Indo-Pacific strategy and present a unified voice on issues of adherence to the rule-based order, including freedom of navigation, free trade, transparency, the peaceful settlement of

⁶³ "Chinese Defense Minister Denies Military Presence in Cambodia", VOA, 3 June 2019, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/chinese-defense-minister-denies-military-presence-in-cambodia/4943615.html>.

⁶⁴ "Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin", NATO, 29 January 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_222203.htm?selectedLocale=en.

⁶⁵ "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States", 9-10.

disputes, the rule of law, and human rights.⁶⁶ This order also upholds certain fundamental political principles – “respect for international law, preservation of the real sovereign independence of regional states, a refusal to legitimate unilateral territorial expansion, and the unconditional acceptance of the sea-lanes as a global commons”.⁶⁷ For America, its security and prosperity will not be sustained unless the new global powers adhere to the norms of the existing international system.⁶⁸

ASEAN has, at its best, been trying to maintain a neutral position and does not align itself with either the U.S. or China. Given the competition between the U.S. and China, ASEAN states, embodied by ASEAN Centrality as its core, have shown nuanced reactions that imply a “consistent and persistent commitment to strategic non-alignment and hedging—if only to avoid the impression that they are taking sides in the face of growing Great Power rivalry”.⁶⁹ In response to the Indo-Pacific concept, Southeast Asian countries turn to a more ASEAN-centric approach by developing its “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)” at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, underlying principles of inclusiveness, economic development and connectivity, and ASEAN Centrality.⁷⁰ The document sought an “inclusive regional architecture” with further strengthening and optimization of ASEAN-led mechanisms like the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) and other relevant ASEAN plus One mechanisms.⁷¹ However, there are concerns among some regional policy experts how ASEAN could fit into broader Indo-Pacific arrangements since the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is not only anti-China, but is dismissive of ASEAN.⁷²

Recently, George Yeo, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, has emphasized that countries in Southeast Asia are smaller power states, making ASEAN the most important circle. Yeo stated, “We

⁶⁶ John C. Aquilino, “Special Lecture Transcript Managing Strategic Competition and the Quest for an Enduring Future in the Indo-Pacific,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, 20 April 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/3363260/international-institute-for-strategic-studies-iiss-special-lecture-transcript-m/>.

⁶⁷ Marvin Ott, “The South China Sea in Strategic Terms,” *Wilson Center*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-south-china-sea-strategic-terms>.

⁶⁸ Heiduk, “Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Asianisation of the regional security architecture”, 25-26.

⁶⁹ See Seng Tan, “Consigned to hedge: South-east Asia and America’s ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ strategy”, *International Affairs* 96 (2020), 131-132.

⁷⁰ “ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific”, *ASEAN*, January 2020, 80-81, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

⁷¹ “ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific”, 38-39.

⁷² Jonathan R. Stromseth, “Rivalry and Response”, in *Navigating Great Power Competition in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press), 1-31.

only grow stronger if ASEAN stays united; all of us can find protection within ASEAN”.⁷³ When the U.S. and its allies, initially Japan and later the U.S. itself, began promoting the Indo-Pacific concept—widely understood to be a strategic move to counter China's influence by including India while excluding China—ASEAN took a stance. ASEAN's position on the Indo-Pacific includes both China and India, which is not favored by the U.S. or Japan. However, it aligns with ASEAN's own interests. A clear example, ASEAN countries declined to subscribe to Japan's attempt of promoting “arc of freedom and prosperity” initiative that de facto excluded China.⁷⁴ There are also risks to ASEAN Centrality in the face of the intense competition between great powers. In an interview with Nhem Boraden, a security expert and university lecturer, he emphasized the risks to ASEAN unity: First, ASEAN could be divided as each tries to carve out their own camp, while some major powers in the region may try to exercise power against another. Second, great powers may push the situation where states are forced to choose side.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the South China Sea remains an intense hotspot in U.S.-China relations. China claims most of the South China Sea under the nine-dash line, a claim challenged by the U.S. and other claimant states. It is believed that if Beijing controls the South China Sea, China would control important waterways and access to critical sea lanes as it seeks to project power in the region. Some observers assert that China may be employing its own version of the Monroe Doctrine in Southeast Asia, seeking to push the U.S. or any non-Asian military presence out of Asia, much the way the United States pushed the European powers out of the Western Hemisphere.⁷⁶ However, China's claim challenges the international order and its preeminent status as a Pacific Nation, which has the right to fly, sail, and operate where international law permits and to ensure access to the global commons.⁷⁷

From historical and strategic point of views, America's security and prosperity have always linked to the world's oceans and the control of waterways. Its primacy depends on access to the global commons to extend global reach and to project power globally. In the words of the United States' 2011 National Military Strategy, “assured access to and freedom of maneuver with the global common—

⁷³ George Yeo, “Threats and Opportunities for Small Countries in a Multipolar World”, *Cambodia Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS)*, 7 December 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXZAKjL1Fww&t=2692s>.

⁷⁴ Giulio Pugliese, “The Free and Open Indo-Pacific as a Strategic Narrative,” *China-US Focus*, 18 February 2019. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-free-and-open-indo-pacific-as-a-strategic-narrative>.

⁷⁵ Nhem Boraden, (University Professor on Security Studies, RUPP) in discussion with the author, April 2024.

⁷⁶ Hung Ming-Te and Tony Tai-Ting Liu. “Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition in Southeast Asia: China's Rise and U.S. Foreign Policy”, *Political Perspectives* Volume 5 (3) (2011), 96-119; Mearsheimer, “China's Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History*, April 2006: 160.

⁷⁷ Aquilino, “Special Lecture Transcript Managing Strategic Competition and the Quest for an Enduring Future in the Indo-Pacific”.

shared areas of sea, air, spaces—and globally connected domains are being increasingly challenged by both state and non-state actors. States are developing anti-access and area-denial capabilities and strategies to constrain U.S. and international freedom of action”.⁷⁸

The South China Sea is a crucial waterway and link in the “global commons,” connecting the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Europe. The U.S. has interests in the South China Sea across three domains: economic interests tied to the sea-lanes, defense ties with allies and partners, and implications for the global balance of power and influence.⁷⁹ When Americans discuss China's involvement within the international system, they imply that, among other things, China must agree to keep the South China Sea open to the U.S. Navy.⁸⁰ The South China Sea covers vital sea-lanes for trade with a total value of about \$3.4 trillion per year and serves as a military artery, with U.S. naval vessels, including the U.S. Seventh Fleet, regularly navigating between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Consequently, it will remain contested for supremacy and subject to complex geopolitical maneuvering, with profound implications for security in the Southeast Asia region in years to come.

The South China Sea dispute is a source of contention and internal disagreement within ASEAN. It also creates friction and competition between the U.S. and China. ASEAN places great importance on issues of coexistence and unity within the bloc. ASEAN was created at the height of the Cold War and its *raison d'être*, also known as ASEAN's Centrality, was internal and external coexistence, through the non-use of force, neutrality and peaceful resolution of dispute, the mobilization of diplomatic solidarity in the face of external threats and non-interference in the internal affairs of member-states.⁸¹ The South China Sea disputes are conflicts of jurisdiction over territory and maritime space between China and some ASEAN's claimant states, not formally an ASEAN issue. At another layer, major power countries have claimed interests in the South China Sea, making the disputes become highly complicated and dangerous, particularly since with the declaration of FOIP which underscores Washington's commitment to a safe, secure, prosperous, and free region. China is singled out for its aggressive and predatory behavior, particularly its militarization of the South China Sea.

Chinese military modernization has troubled the U.S. and its allies and partners in the region. At the foreign ministers' meetings on East Asia Cooperation in Jakarta on July 14, 2023, State Councilor Wang

⁷⁸ “The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2011”, *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2011, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154942/US%20National%20Military%20Strategy%202011.pdf>

⁷⁹ Ott, “The South China Sea in Strategic Terms”.

⁸⁰ Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 201-02.

⁸¹ Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia*, 1st edn (London: Routledge, 1989), 38-39.

Yi expressed on the issue of freedom of navigation, “South China Sea is one of the safest and freest waters for navigation in the world today”.⁸² In this statement, Wang was referring to the commercial ships that transit through the South China Sea, not naval vessels. Chinese officials have suggested interpretations of international law that could potentially close the South China Sea to the U.S. Navy. Simultaneously, China is building up war machines “with the capacity to deny the sea to American fleets”.⁸³ President Xi Jinping emphasized the need to build a strong navy during his review of the Chinese PLA Navy in 2018, stating that “the need to build a strong navy has never been more urgent than today. China’s aspiration to have a strong navy, which serves as a key guarantee to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”.⁸⁴ In fact, both the U.S. and China are contemplating war scenarios. Admiral Aquilino, Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, believes that “Conflict (with China) is neither imminent nor inevitable”.⁸⁵

The danger of a flare-up and direct confrontation between the U.S. and China in the South China Sea will potentially arise over “access” to global commons, resulting from unprecedented mishaps, miscalculations, or misunderstandings by both sides regarding such incidents. Both the U.S. and China consistently point fingers at each other over who provoked the situation. China accuses the U.S. of stoking flames in the South China Sea in the name of freedom of navigation and rule-based order. In Wang Yi’s words, “non-regional countries should stop sending advanced ships and aircraft here to flex muscles, stop provoking and exploiting differences between regional countries for their own geopolitical interests and selfish gains, and stop making groundless comments without understanding the realities”.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the U.S. labels China as a “threat” to existing rules and norms and a “revisionist” that seeks to change the status quo through aggressive actions, intimidation, and increasing coercive and risky military operational behavior in the East and South China Seas.

In the past, there have been many instances where both the U.S. and China have come into confrontation in the Indo-Pacific. Among these, the “Taiwan Crisis” of March 1996 and the “EP-3 Crisis” are cases in point. Both incidents taught China painfully a great deal. During the “Taiwan Strait Crisis”

⁸² “Wang Yi Makes Clear China’s Principled Position on the South China Sea Issue”, *China Today*, 15 July 2023, http://sg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/jbwzlm/jrzg/202307/t20230719_11115019.htm#:~:text=He%20refuted%20the%20South%20China%20Sea%20arbitration%20and,freest%20waters%20for%20navigation%20in%20the%20world%20today.

⁸³ Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 207.

⁸⁴ “China Focus: President Xi reviews navy in South China Sea”, *Xinhua*, 13 April 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/13/c_137106984.htm.

⁸⁵ Aquilino, “Special Lecture Transcript Managing Strategic Competition and the Quest for an Enduring Future in the Indo-Pacific”.

⁸⁶ “China Focus: President Xi reviews navy in South China Sea”.

in 1996, President Bill Clinton sent two aircraft carrier groups to show of force and pressure the Chinese military to cease a series of military exercises surrounding Taiwan in the run-up to Taiwan's general election. The deployment of the two carriers was a trigger for the Chinese PLA Navy (PLAN) to develop its capacity and means to prevent it from happening again and after that episode, the concept of "Air-Sea Battle" emerged and the Chinese military spending increased significantly, with the focus towards the navy, air force and missile units.⁸⁷ Another unfortunate event occurred on Sunday, April 1, 2001, involving a U.S. Navy EP-3 surveillance plane colliding with a Chinese F-8 fighter jet in the airspace above China's claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea, resulting in the death of a Chinese pilot and prompting a diplomatic standoff between both countries for several weeks. The situation was eventually resolved with a letter from the U.S. government expressing "very sorry for the incident".⁸⁸

In recent years, confrontational incidents between the U.S. military and the Chinese PLA have been escalating in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. views that the PLA has exhibited highly concerning behavior, engaging in both coercive and risky operations with fighter jets in the East and South China Seas. According to the DoD's 2023 China Military Power Report (CMPR), there have been 180 such incidents since the fall of 2021, more in the last two years than in the decade prior.⁸⁹ Over the past two years, there have been approximately 300 cases of coercive and risky behavior by the PLA intercepting U.S., allies, and partner aircraft. The U.S. alone accounted for nearly 200 cases involving reckless maneuvers, discharged chaff or flares, or approaching U.S. aircraft too rapidly.⁹⁰

Despite the intensifying danger, the U.S. will continue its operations and military presence in the Indo-Pacific region alongside its allies and partners to advance the shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, as described by Secretary Austin at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2023: "respect for sovereignty, adherence to international law, belief in transparency and openness, freedom of commerce and navigation, equal rights for all states, and peaceful resolution of disputes not through coercion or conquest".⁹¹ The U.S. continues to challenge China by sending naval vessels and carrier battle groups

⁸⁷ Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, 207-08.

⁸⁸ Eric Donnelly, "The United States-China EP-3 incident: legality and realpolitik," *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* (Oxford University Press, 2004) 9 (1): 25-42, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/9.1.25>.

⁸⁹ Sabrina Singh, "Holds a Press Briefing With Assistant Secretary Ratner and Admiral Aquilino," *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, 26 October 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/3584549/sabrina-singh-deputy-pentagon-press-secretary-holds-a-press-briefing-with-assis/>.

⁹⁰ Singh, "Holds a Press Briefing With Assistant Secretary Ratner and Admiral Aquilino".

⁹¹ Lloyd Austin, "United States' Leadership in the Indo-Pacific," *IJSS*, 3 June 2023, https://www.ijss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/shangri-la-dialogue/2023/final-transcripts/p-1/lloyd-j-austin-iii-secretary-of-defense-us---as-delivered_sld23.pdf.

sailing through the Taiwan straits and the South China Sea in an effort to balance and deter China's aggression.⁹² It is undeniable that similar incidents may recur if not carefully managed. Since the Taiwan's Crisis 1996, Beijing's focus on military capacity build-up has been emboldened, while pushing a program of military modernization of its missile and anti-ship capabilities, through a combination of missiles and submarines that could maintain the U.S. at an arm's length.⁹³ In 2023, the Chinese defense spending increased 5.4% amounting to \$219.5 billion, making China, as Robert Wall put it, no longer Russia, is "driving the designs" of modernizing capabilities.⁹⁴

In July 2020, the U.S. deployed two carrier strike groups, the USS Ronald Reagan and the USS Nimitz, to sail into the South China Sea, defying China's claims over much of this maritime geography, a stance consistently supported by the American allies. Secretary Mike Pompeo denounced China's claims to the nine-dashed line as having "no coherent basis in international and maritime law" and deemed their exploitation of offshore resources in the South China Sea "completely unlawful".⁹⁵ The deployment of the carriers was accompanied by joint exercises involving jets, reconnaissance planes, and helicopters, conducted with India, Japan, and Australia in the Indian Ocean and the Philippine Sea. This deployment went beyond a routine passage; it aimed to assert the right to free navigation. Rear Adm. Jim Kirk, commander of the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group, stated that the deployment of carrier groups was also intended "to reinforce the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, a rules-based international order, and to U.S. allies and partners in the region".⁹⁶

China, however, viewed U.S.' action as "flexing its muscles and making provocation, threatening regional security and stability, and conducting navigation hegemony",⁹⁷ and "an attempt to collude with other countries to contain China".⁹⁸ In response, the Chinese PLA Rocket Force conducted a month-long military exercise, involving the launch of an anti-ship ballistic missile known as the intermediate-range DF-26, often referred to as the "aircraft carrier killer," in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands. This exercise aimed to demonstrate China's deterrence capabilities and its

⁹² Douglas Porch, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996: Strategic Implications for the United States Navy," *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 52, No. 3, 1999): 40-43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44643008>.

⁹³ Porch, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996: Strategic Implications for the United States Navy", 25-32.

⁹⁴ Rhyannon Bartlett-Imadegawa, "China preparing for 'protracted' war," *Nikkei Asia*, 14 February 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/China-preparing-for-protracted-war-says-think-tank>.

⁹⁵ Jack Detsch, "U.S. Carriers Send a Message to Beijing Over South China Sea," *Foreign Policy*, 9 July 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/09/us-carriers-south-china-sea-sending-message-ronald-reagan-nimitz/>.

⁹⁶ Sam Lagrone, "Two U.S. Carriers Return to South China Sea After State Dept. Formally Rejects Chinese Claims," *USNI*, 17 July 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/07/17/two-u-s-carriers-return-to-south-china-sea-after-state-dept-formally-rejects-chinese-claims>.

⁹⁷ Lagrone, "Two U.S. Carriers Return to South China Sea After State Dept. Formally Rejects Chinese Claims".

⁹⁸ Liu Xuanzun, "PLA Rocket Force launches DF-26 'aircraft carrier killer' missile in fast-reaction drills," *Global Times*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1196944.shtml>.

commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty and security, unlike 1995-1996.⁹⁹ The DF-26 and DF-21D are Chinese anti-ship missiles capable of carrying conventional or nuclear warheads. They possess cross-regional maneuvering abilities, allowing them to strike targets without relying on preset launch sites. These missiles are designed for precision strikes on both land and maritime targets, including aircraft carriers, at both long and short ranges.¹⁰⁰

Despite China's warnings, the U.S. persists in sending warships through the disputed South China Sea, risking the potential escalation to a full-blown conflict due to any unpredictable mishap or miscalculation. Instances of near collisions between the U.S. and Chinese vessels have occurred frequently, with both sides blaming each other for provocation and unprofessional actions. In December 2023, an American warship, the USS Gabrielle Giffords, was conducting what the U.S. termed "routine operations in international waters in accordance with international law" near the Second Thomas Shoal.¹⁰¹ According to Cmdr. Megan Greene of the US 7th Fleet, the U.S. remains committed to working alongside its allies and partners to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.¹⁰² Nonetheless, China's military viewed the U.S. as the biggest threat to peace and stability in the region and regards the presence of the littoral combat ship as a serious violation of its sovereignty and security, undermining regional peace and stability.¹⁰³

Time and again, INDO-PACOM Commander Admiral Aquilino expressed that conflict with the PRC is not inevitable.¹⁰⁴ In Southeast Asia, one hotspot that could bring the U.S. and China into a head-on military confrontation is over the dispute between the Philippines, a U.S. ally, and the PRC, particularly, in case of potential incidents or miscalculations. At this moment, the tension between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea poses a grave security concern in the region. The clashes between Philippine and Chinese vessels have escalated to an alarming scale, with both sides accusing each other of exacerbating the situation during a resupply mission to the military outpost in Second Thomas Shoal. Tensions between Beijing and Manila near the flashpoint Second Thomas Shoal have soared in recent months. Since taking office, President Ferdinand Marcos has forged closer ties with its traditional and

⁹⁹ Xuanzun, "PLA Rocket Force launches DF-26 'aircraft carrier killer' missile in fast-reaction drills".

¹⁰⁰ Xuanzun, "PLA Rocket Force launches DF-26 'aircraft carrier killer' missile in fast-reaction drills".

¹⁰¹ "China says U.S. Navy ship 'seriously violated' its sovereignty", *Bloomberg*, 4 December 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/12/04/asia-pacific/politics/us-china-south-china-sea-sailing/#:~:text=China%20criticized%20the%20U.S.%20after,military%20tensions%20between%20the%20nations>.

¹⁰² "China says U.S. Navy ship 'seriously violated' its sovereignty".

¹⁰³ "China says U.S. Navy ship 'seriously violated' its sovereignty".

¹⁰⁴ John C. Aquilino, "Preserving a Legacy of Liberty and Peace in the Indo-Pacific," *The National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUCR)*, 23 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28uPUx1v PI>.

treaty ally, the U.S., while demonstrating a more assertive transparency campaign to publicize China's actions of intimidation and coercion.¹⁰⁵ In February 2023, President Marcos allowed four new military bases under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, in the northern provinces facing the South China Sea, in addition to the existing five bases in the country, for the United States forces deployed to the Philippines. In April 2023, the 38th and largest iteration of Exercise Balikatan was hosted by the Philippines' Armed Forces with participation from more than 17,600 personnel, mainly from the United States.¹⁰⁶

At the 2024 Sangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reiterated that the United States is a Pacific nation and Indo-Pacific has remained its priority theater of operations, together with allies and partners like never before.¹⁰⁷ Secretary Austin also made an interesting point of the shift from the existing hub and spokes security arrangement to the "new convergence", in which the United States continues its investment and commitments to working with allies and partners in the region for more interoperability, more advanced capacities and more security. In this new convergence concept, the U.S. works with Australia and Japan on an integrated air and missile defense architecture, provides training for defense leaders of South East Asia and expands rotational accesses to the four new sites in the Philippines.

Lately, there have been growing challenges and tensions to peace and stability in the Western Pacific, with China deploying vessels to deter the Philippines navy from increasing resupplying missions for troops stationed on an islet in the South China Sea. In March 2024, the Philippines' routine and resupply missions to the military base atop a grounded World War II-era warship in Second Thomas Shoal, also called Ren'ai Reef in China, were disrupted, blocked, and harassed with water cannons by China Coast Guard ships, causing damage and injury to personnel aboard the civilian boat (UM4) hired to conduct the resupply missions.¹⁰⁸ In response to China's aggressive actions, Manila has pledged to conduct monthly resupply missions to troops in the Shoal and to increase the patrol frequency of the Philippine Coast Guard to protect its fishermen. In September 2023, the Philippines and the United States conducted their first joint sail since 2016 in the South China Sea.¹⁰⁹ Beijing, nevertheless,

¹⁰⁵ Carlyle Thayer, "Chinese aggression ramps up in the South China Sea," *East Asia Forum*, 13 March 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/13/chinese-aggression-ramps-up-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

¹⁰⁶ Thayer, "Chinese aggression ramps up in the South China Sea".

¹⁰⁷ Lloyd J. Austin, "Speech in Singapore Makes Waves at Asian Defense Summit," *The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS)*, 1 June 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isKteNo3dkk&t=1290s>.

¹⁰⁸ Jesse Johnson, "After clash, China warns Philippines over escalation in South China Sea," *Japan Times*, 23 March 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/03/24/asia-pacific/politics/china-philippines-south-china-sea-escalation/>.

¹⁰⁹ Thayer, "Chinese aggression ramps up in the South China Sea".

continues to challenge such moves and accuses Manila of violating Chinese sovereignty. For instance, in October 2023, according to China's Southern Theatre Command, it had warned off a Philippine Navy frigate for trespassing in the waters around Scarborough Shoal.¹¹⁰ In December 2023, Chinese Coast Guard ships fired water cannons and rammed into Filipino vessels, and in January 2024, China's navy deployed up to 27 vessels in the waters around Second Thomas Shoal to challenge the Philippines' vessels and prevent resupply.¹¹¹

China, however, blamed the Philippines for the mishaps and breaking the promises it has made by inviting outside power into play vis-à-vis creating tension in the South China Sea. Admiral Dong Jun, Minister of National Defense, expressed "a certain country (referring to the Philippines), emboldened by outside powers, has broken bilateral agreements and its own promise, made premeditated provocations and created false scenarios to mislead the public. Moreover, it has ignored the overall interests of our region and violated the ASEAN Charter by allowing an outside country to deploy a mid-range missile system. This act will endanger the security and stability of our region".¹¹² On April 11, 2024, the Philippines allowed the deployment of the Mid-Range Capability (MRC) to Northern Luzon, as part of Exercise Salaknib 24, that also angered China. The landmark deployment was done by the U.S. 1st Multi-Domain Task Force in coordination with the Philippines Armed Forces for the new capability and enhancing interoperability, readiness, and joint defense capability and directly supports the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and U.S. Army Pacific in their efforts to a free and open Indo-Pacific.¹¹³ The MRC is a land-based, ground-launched system that enhances multi-domain fires and its launcher can fire the Standard Missile 6 (SM-6) and the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile.

In the coming years, tensions in the West Philippine Sea are likely to exacerbate, and conflicts between the Philippines and the People's Republic of China (PRC) could intensify if the Philippines continues to step up actions beyond normal routine resupply missions. Since 2023, the Philippines has adopted a more proactive posture by enhancing defense cooperation with the U.S., Australia, and Japan, conducting more drills and patrols in waters near the Second Thomas Shoal, and expressing the intention to build up infrastructure on the islands in the disputed waters. In such cases, China would not likely to stay calm, but respond with a more aggressive position, as it has done before.

¹¹⁰ Thayer, "Chinese aggression ramps up in the South China Sea".

¹¹¹ Thayer, "Chinese aggression ramps up in the South China Sea".

¹¹² Admiral Dong Jun, "China's Approach to Global Security," *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, 2 June 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/shangri-la-dialogue/2024/transcripts/final/p5/admiral-dong-jun-minister-of-national-defense-china--as-delivered.pdf>.

¹¹³ "US Army's Mid-Range Capability makes its first deployment in the Philippines for Salaknib 24", *U.S. Army Pacific*, 15 April 2024, <https://www.usarpac.army.mil/Our-Story/Our-News/Article-Display/Article/3740807/us-armys-mid-range-capability-makes-its-first-deployment-in-the-philippines-for/>.

When it comes to China's defense, the South China Sea is a strategic location for China's submarines, because it is deep enough for the submarines to sail under without detection from U.S. satellites. George Yeo, former Singapore foreign minister, emphasized that both the U.S. and China have thought of war scenarios and what happens if there is a war.¹¹⁴ Yeo emphasized that the U.S. has come to the conclusion that if it's a conventional war, there is no certainty of winning; in fact, there is a good chance that they may lose because China now has hypersonic missiles which can travel maybe two or three thousand kilometers to hit U.S. aircraft carriers. Yet, Yeo believed that for the Americans, if they want to deter China, they must be able to threaten China with nuclear weapons, tactical and possibly strategic if necessary. Yeo pointed out China knows that the U.S. wants to deny them a counter-strike capability. They have put missiles on high-speed trains, and China has many tunnels to hide these missiles. However, today, with satellites, every railroad, every fast train, and the entrance and exit of every tunnel can be monitored. Thus, China is not sure that its land-based ICBMs can hit back. They know they need submarines, and the only sea deep enough is the South China Sea. The reason for AUKUS is to add maybe another eight Australian attack submarines so that every strategic submarine in the PLA Navy can be tracked and hunted down.¹¹⁵ Along this line, both the United and China are considering the possibility of a nuclear exchange. China knows that it must have an assured counter-strike capability because the U.S. wants to deny them this capability. Consequently, as part of its nuclear deterrent, Yeo suggested that from a few hundred warheads, China is going to increase it to maybe one or two thousand warheads. The U.S. knows that at the conventional level, they may not prevail, but at the nuclear level, the risks are too high.¹¹⁶

China has learned painful lessons from its past, particularly during the era of humiliation, realizing its vulnerability lies primarily at sea rather than on land. According to Professor John Mearsheimer, within the structural realist school of international relations, China's optimal strategy for survival involves becoming a powerful regional hegemon in Asia, similar to the United States' position in the Western Hemisphere.¹¹⁷ Consequently, the United States and China are engaged in a "security competition" that could potentially escalate into conflict. Mearsheimer argues that China seeks to push the U.S. Navy beyond the first island chain in Asia, aiming to expel American influence from the region. In case of regional crisis or war, rather than head-on confrontation with the superior U.S.' forces, China would

¹¹⁴ George Yeo, "Keynote Speech," 亞太千里論壇, 9 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbtJ2MMrCb4&t=20s>.

¹¹⁵ Yeo, "Keynote Speech".

¹¹⁶ Yeo, "Keynote Speech".

¹¹⁷ Amitai Etzioni, "Mearsheimer's War With China," *The Diplomat*, 29 March 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/mearsheimers-war-with-china/>.

do its best to keep the U.S. forces out of the region at any cost and any time, by employing its A2/AD strategy.¹¹⁸

China's PLA Navy is enhancing its naval capabilities, focusing on both defensive and offensive strategies, including the development of extended Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. This "counter-intervention" strategy aims to restrict the U.S. and allied forces' deployment and movement within China's nearby seas, combining anti-access measures to prevent entry and area denial tactics to limit operational freedom.¹¹⁹ China's A2/AD system encompasses both air and sea operations, covering the First Island Chain and challenging U.S. hegemonic dominance and global interests in the region.

China's expansion of the two naval bases in Yulia and Longpo on Hainan Island in the South China Sea exemplifies its strategic priorities. These facilities have been upgraded to accommodate an increasing number of vessels necessary to protect Chinese interests, including housing "China's new sea-borne nuclear deterrent" in preparation for the worst-case scenarios.¹²⁰ In addition to this buildup, China has established a ring of maritime watchtowers or bastions around Hainan to safeguard its underwater assets and exert control over the Spratly Islands.¹²¹

Alexander Neal, a former defense analyst for the British government, highlights Hainan's crucial strategic location, offering geographical projection for the People's Liberation Army Navy, especially its submarines, into the deeper parts of the South China Sea, where detection becomes more challenging.¹²² China's fleet of nuclear submarines is beginning to approach the capabilities of the United States, France, and the UK.¹²³

China has made significant strides in its multilayered naval strategy, particularly with the introduction of new classes of submarines, both nuclear and conventional. According to the Statcore Group, China

¹¹⁸ Yoji Koda, "China's Blue Water Navy Strategy and its Implications," *Center for a New American Security (CNAS)*, 20 March 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/chinas-blue-water-navy-strategy-and-its-implications>.

¹¹⁹ Fabian-Lucas Romero Meraner, "China's Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy," *The Defense Horizon Journal (TDHJ)*, 9 February 2023, <https://tdhj.org/blog/post/china-a2ad-strategy/>.

¹²⁰ "This Chinese Island Holds the Secrets to Beijing's Massive Naval Expansion", *The Wall Street Journal*. 29 May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCOMWxmLvjo>.

¹²¹ Iskander Rehman, "Dragon in a Bathtub: Chinese Nuclear Submarines and the South China Sea," *Carnegie Endowment*, 9 March 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2013/03/dragon-in-a-bathtub-chinese-nuclear-submarines-and-the-south-china-sea?lang=en¢er=global>.

¹²² "This Chinese Island Holds the Secrets to Beijing's Massive Naval Expansion".

¹²³ "This Chinese Island Holds the Secrets to Beijing's Massive Naval Expansion".

currently operates up to 45 submarines across six classes. These include indigenously-designed diesel submarines such as the Song class (Type 039) and Yuan class (Type 041), as well as four nuclear classes: the Shang class, Jin class, SSBN, and SSN, with the Tang class SSBN also noted.¹²⁴ Hainan Island serves as a pivotal base for these forces.

To establish a "near-continuous at-sea strategic deterrent," China is equipping its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines with advanced JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) capable of targeting the continental United States.¹²⁵ Alexander Neal notes that these efforts include coaxing Chinese nuclear submarines into tunnels as a significant measure to protect China's seaborne nuclear deterrent. These submarines can penetrate the first island chain and launch from the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, potentially reaching the Eastern seaboard of the United States.¹²⁶

Over the last two decades, China has made substantial investments in shipbuilding as part of its efforts to enhance maritime power projection. In 2023, China accounted for more than half of the world's commercial shipbuilding, whereas the U.S. contributed less than 1 percent.¹²⁷ This statistic underscores China's prioritization of maritime capabilities, particularly in safeguarding the South China Sea. China has significantly upgraded facilities and infrastructure in Hainan as it expands its naval fleet. Currently, China boasts the world's largest navy, with over 370 vessels, surpassing the U.S. which has approximately 296 vessels. China's navy is projected to grow to 435 vessels by 2030, while the U.S. plans to increase its fleet to over 300 vessels by the early 2030s.¹²⁸ In the present security complexity, China is required to have the capability to reach and influence far beyond its shores. The PLA Navy, which has made significant progress both in size and technological sophistication in a two-decade, plays a pivotal role in supporting its assertive maritime claims of the East and South China Sea.¹²⁹

Cambodia's Response and Policy Choices

¹²⁴ "Role of Submarines", *Statcore Group*, n.d., [https://www.cassindia.com/role-of-submarines#:~:text=China%20is%20currently%20operating%20as,\(Type%20094\)%20nuclear%2Dpowered](https://www.cassindia.com/role-of-submarines#:~:text=China%20is%20currently%20operating%20as,(Type%20094)%20nuclear%2Dpowered).

¹²⁵ Luke Caggiano, "China Deploys New Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles," *Arms Control Association*, May 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-05/news/china-deploys-new-submarine-launched-ballistic-missiles>.

¹²⁶ "This Chinese Island Holds the Secrets to Beijing's Massive Naval Expansion".

¹²⁷ "How China's \$100B+ Shipbuilding Empire Dominates the U.S.'s | WSJ U.S. vs. China" *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRVVXDyg3RY&t=45s>.

¹²⁸ "How China's \$100B+ Shipbuilding Empire Dominates the U.S.'s | WSJ U.S. vs. China"

¹²⁹ Koda, "China's Blue Water Navy Strategy and its Implications".

Cambodia is a small state in Southeast Asia and a member of ASEAN. Its past has been marked with suffering and fragility. Cambodia has risen with resolute will to promote unity and peace based on a multi-party liberal democracy. The ultimate objectives of its foreign policy, as enshrined in the Constitution, are to preserve and protect Cambodia's territorial integrity and sovereignty as an independent nation and, second, to move the nation forward with development, prosperity, and glory. Cambodia has always been and will continue to be a small state in a large, dangerous world and a tough region of the Indo-Pacific. The existential challenge for Cambodia is how it achieves these ultimate objectives and continues to succeed in an unprecedented, complex, and changing world. The researcher has tried to answer how Cambodia overcomes this existential challenge, stays relevant, and adapts as the world changes through in-depth interviews with scholars, diplomats, politicians, and government officials.

It is in Cambodia's national interest to navigate the intense rivalry between the U.S. and China carefully. Cambodia's core interests lie in maintaining peace, security, and stability to foster development and growth, as well as upholding territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence. It is crucial for Cambodia to pursue a foreign policy that remains independent and free from external influences and pressures. However, the competition between the U.S. and China poses concerns and complexities for Cambodia's efforts to strike a delicate balance. Cambodia seeks to maintain good relationships with both the U.S. and China without aligning with either side, particularly concerning its security and foreign policy.

Some questions that have been raised include the following: First, what are the key security challenges Cambodia faces? Second, what policy choices and approaches should Cambodia make to navigate the complex security environment in the region, given the growing U.S.-China competition? And third, how does Cambodia's internal political landscape influence its foreign and security policy in navigating the emerging security order in the Indo-Pacific amidst intensifying U.S.-China competition?

Key Security challenges facing Cambodia

Southeast Asia has become a theater of power competition, particularly between the U.S. and China. Like other countries in the region, Cambodia too is caught in between great power rivalry. As a member of ASEAN, Cambodia fully supports ASEAN core values the so-called ASEAN Centrality, particularly ASEAN's policies of neutrality, non-interference into the internal affairs of its members, consensus, and peaceful resolution of dispute. ASEAN composes of ten small states and each member is independent in their foreign policy conduct. Chheang Vannarith argued that all Southeast Asian countries are

pursuing hedging strategies to varying degrees to maintain their strategic autonomy and agency. He added, "For Cambodia, the rising complex and volatile security environment in the Indo-Pacific poses serious impacts and threats to its national security. Foreign interference in Cambodia's domestic affairs might become more intense and complex".¹³⁰ However, ASEAN could serve as a bargaining power and shield when dealing with major powers by working as a group on issues of mutual concern such as security, economics and socio-politics.

Cambodia's foreign policy is anchored on the principles of neutrality, independence, non-alignment, flexibility, and being a friend to all and an enemy to none. Cambodia is trying to balance its relations with all sides, especially with the U.S. and China, for the sake of its national interests. When U.S.-China competition becomes intense, Cambodia also finds it difficult to position itself. As George Yeo put it during his lecture at the Royal University of Phnom Penh last year, "We cannot ignore China. We cannot ignore the U.S. So, we spend a lot of time thinking through how to position ourselves. Cambodia has been able to strike that balance. From time to time, you (Cambodia) are accused of being pro-China, and sometimes, China thinks you are too influenced by the U.S. But the deep instinct here is we are pro-Cambodia first".¹³¹

Cambodia is a price taker, and developments around it pose significant implications for its policy choices. Therefore, it is necessary for Cambodia to remain flexible, stay relevant, and contribute to peace in the region and the world. If war breaks out in the region, Cambodia will be impacted, as the saying goes, when elephants fight, grass suffers. Cambodia's security is interconnected with the security in Southeast Asia and the world. What happens globally and regionally will also impact Cambodia. That's why, Cambodia always supports efforts that would contribute to building peace and stability in the region and the world. According to Cambodia's National Defense Policy 2022, potential security threats and challenges in the Southeast Asia region include great-power rivalry and the South China Sea dispute.¹³²

Relations between great powers, while expanding their sphere of influence and geopolitical dominance, remain major challenges for Southeast Asia as a whole. It is hard to predict the situation, and it could worsen if their competition leads to an escalatory spiral into armed conflict. Chansomanith viewed that, because of the tension between the two superpowers, there is a risk of proxy conflicts in

¹³⁰ Vannarith, in discussion with the author, February 2024.

¹³¹ Yeo, "Threats and Opportunities for Small Countries in a Multipolar World".

¹³² Ministry of Defense, *National Defense White Paper* (Phnom Penh: The Royal Government of Cambodia, 2022), 21-22.

the region. He foresees that competition between the U.S. and China could lead to a new Cold War (Cold War 2.0), with the risks of proxy wars in Southeast Asia becoming possible. Examples include the political crisis in Myanmar, the dispute in the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula issue. If this occurs, it will not only impact regional stability and security but also negatively affect peace and security in Cambodia.¹³³

On national security threats, subversion or interference in Cambodia's internal affairs is a leading cause for concern for the Cambodian government. Subversion can take numerous forms, such as color revolutions and regime change, racial and religious discrimination, social class discrimination, anti-government incitement, or the circulation of fake news.¹³⁴ Foreign interference often manifests through financial and political support under the pretext of aiding social and environmental work. The ultimate goal of such interference is to keep the neutrality of the armed forces in check. Furthermore, incorrect reports on human rights and freedom violations could incite social unrest and violence. These activities undermine the legitimacy and image of the government, which can be regarded as a threat to national security. Given this, Chheang Vannarith highlighted some security challenges and risks for Cambodia, include: First, foreign intervention might lead to political instability, economic crisis, and regime change, such as through a color revolution. Second, there is economic security due to overreliance on China. As the geopolitics of the supply chain becomes more complex, Cambodia's supply chain networks might be affected by China-U.S. economic fragmentation. Third, economics determines politics; an economic recession or crisis will lead to political instability and crisis.¹³⁵

Navigating the complex security environment

Given the complex security environment in the Indo-Pacific, Cambodia's foreign policy must be carried out with flexibility and sensibility in response to the surrounding geo-political pressure. As Samath Chansomanith, President of the think-tank Center, VOHAR, noted in an interview, "Securitization by any power in the region should be restrained as much as possible, particularly by supporting ASEAN's call for great powers to lower tensions and turn towards cooperation and the development of the economy and society".¹³⁶ At the same time, Yeo simply put "In ASEAN, we do not want to get involved in conflict. We have our claims we have our economic interests but we are not involved in nuclear warfare".¹³⁷ In his transcript report to the Party Congress, former Prime Minister Hun Sen has outlined

¹³³ Samarth Chansomanith (President, VOHAR Center), in discussion with the author, 29 February 2024.

¹³⁴ Ministry of Defense, *National Defense White Paper*, 36-40.

¹³⁵ Vannarith, in discussion with the author, February 2024.

¹³⁶ Chansomanith, in discussion with the author, 29 February 2024.

¹³⁷ Yeo, "Threats and Opportunities for Small Countries in a Multipolar World".

four principles and seven policies for Cambodian foreign policy. These have served Cambodia well since it achieved peace through the win-win policy in 1998.

First, Cambodia aims to protect its core interests by firmly upholding and defending the constitution, exercising proactive diplomacy regarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and maintaining peace, stability, and socio-economic development.¹³⁸ According to Article 53 of the Constitution, Cambodia adopts a policy of permanent neutrality and non-alignment. It follows a policy of peaceful coexistence with its neighbors and other countries worldwide. Cambodia shall not invade any country or interfere in any country's internal affairs, directly or indirectly, and shall solve any problems peacefully with respect for mutual interests. It shall not join any military alliance or pact incompatible with its policy of neutrality. Cambodia shall not permit any foreign military base on its territory and shall not have its military base abroad, except within the framework of a United Nations request. Cambodia reserves the right to receive foreign assistance in military equipment, armaments, ammunition, and training of its armed forces, as well as other assistance for self-defense and to maintain public order and security within its sovereign territory.¹³⁹ For instance, regarding the South China Sea dispute, Cambodia's position is to resolve it through peaceful means and dialogue. In a conversation with VOA News on September 27, 2017, Prak Sokhonn, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, expressed that Cambodia wanted all disputing parties to resolve the issue through dialogue and negotiation, maintaining normalcy and the status quo, and through bilateral negotiations with China and other claimants.¹⁴⁰

Second, Cambodia continues to exercise a rules-based and independent foreign policy by adhering to the principles and mechanisms stipulated in the bylaws of the United Nations and ASEAN. It exercises diplomacy in a soft yet firm manner, with flexibility and balance in response to the changing geopolitical environment in the region and the world. Cambodia aims to maintain, nurture, and promote relations with partners based on respect for independence, sovereignty, and mutual interests.¹⁴¹ Time and again, Prime Minister Hun Sen warned that Cambodia will not compromise its independence in return for aid from any foreign state. Cambodia must stand tall in the face of pressure and will not tolerate interference into its domestic affairs or allow intimidation into acquiescence.

¹³⁸ Hun Sen, *Management of Cambodia Foreign Policy* (Phnom Penh: Royal Government of Cambodia, 2023), 1-2.

¹³⁹ Kingdom of Cambodia, "Chapter IV: On Policy", in *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Royal Government of Cambodia, 2017), 12.

¹⁴⁰ Prak Sokhonn (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cambodia), in discussion with VOA, 26 September 2017.

¹⁴¹ Sen, *Management of Cambodia Foreign Policy*, 2.

Third, Cambodia contributes to regional and international efforts to build and maintain peace, stability, and prosperity in areas of common concern such as climate change, transnational crimes, terrorism, and pandemics. It has been active in UN peacekeeping and mine and weapon clearing. Cambodia promotes multilateralism and participates in regional and international forums. Its success as ASEAN Chair has enhanced Cambodia's image on the world stage.¹⁴² Multilateralism helps Cambodia to maintain its strategic autonomy and through these multilateral institutions, it could better exercise its agency and helps shield Cambodia's security especially from foreign intervention. Cambodia can also use multilateral systems to raise its security concerns and advance its security interests.¹⁴³ In an interview with researcher, ambassador Chanborei expressed that Cambodia's foreign policy, led by the ruling-Cambodia People's Party, is very consistent based on three core principles: (1) Cambodia welcomes all international parties which aim at building peace, stability and development, (2) Cambodia supports initiatives that do not target any party, (3) Cambodia supports all principles that conform to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).¹⁴⁴

Fourth, Cambodia promotes economic diplomacy with old and new partners through free trade agreements and bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to support domestic production and promote exports. Economic, trade, and investment relations contribute not only to socio-economic development but also to improved political relations between states.¹⁴⁵

In addition to the above principles, Cambodian then-Prime Minister Hun Sen has outlined seven policies including: (1) Do not support the use of force or intimidation in international relations, (2) Do not support invasion against independent states, (3) Do not support separatist movements, (4) Do not support land grabbing or redrawing of boundaries of any state, (5) Do not interfere in the internal affairs of another state, (6) Do not allow foreign military bases on Cambodian soil, as prescribed in the Cambodian Constitution, and (7) Do not align with any country or faction against another state or group; Cambodia remains neutral and non-aligned.¹⁴⁶

Cambodia's approach to foreign policy is rules-based and independent. For example, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Cambodia strongly objected and voted against Russia's actions in the UN. Cambodia expressed that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of any independent state,

¹⁴² Sen, *Management of Cambodia Foreign Policy*, 2.

¹⁴³ Vannarith, in discussion with the author, February 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Boran Chanborei (Cambodian Ambassador, Australia), in discussion with author, March 2024.

¹⁴⁵ Sen, *Management of Cambodia Foreign Policy*, 2-3.

¹⁴⁶ Sen, *Management of Cambodia Foreign Policy*, 2-3.

including Ukraine, and international law, must be respected. Prime Minister Hun Sen stated, “The world was amazed by Cambodia’s stance. But this is our position. Our rules-based policy is strong and firm”.¹⁴⁷ Ambassador Chanborei described Cambodia's rules-based foreign policy as being based on the norms, rules, regulations, and charters as prescribed by the United Nations and its bodies, ASEAN, and international laws to which Cambodia is a signatory.¹⁴⁸

In the context of U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, Cambodia is caught in the crossfire. Cambodia wants to be good friends with both the United States and China. So, as tensions rise, Cambodia finds it difficult to strike a balance between the two major powers. China is a close and traditional friend of Cambodia, with both sides describing their relationship as “iron-clad”. Cambodia’s relations with the U.S. are also good, though this relationship has experienced twists and turns. Cambodia is willing to improve its relations on the basis of mutual interests, mutual respect and win-win approach. Cambodia-U.S. relations marked a downward trend in recent years after an alleged report from the Wall Street Journal in July 2019 claimed that Cambodia agreed to allow the Chinese military to use the Ream Naval Base. Cambodian authorities dismissed these allegations but acknowledged that the Ream Naval Base, a facility in the Gulf of Thailand, was being modernized with support from China to improve its naval capability for effectively responding to threats at sea, combating crimes, conducting joint naval exercises, and protecting its maritime territorial integrity. The base, which could only host vessels of up to 5,000 tons displacement even after the modernization, is too shallow to function as a “military” outpost. Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh clarified at the ground-breaking ceremony of the upgrade project in June 2022 “The port is too small and even after upgrading, it can’t be a port that would threaten any countries”.¹⁴⁹ Defense Minister Tea Banh added that American and other foreign representatives were invited to the base to see for themselves that “there is nothing here”.¹⁵⁰

Despite Cambodia’s efforts to clear doubts about a Chinese military presence at the Ream Naval Base, suspicions continued to mount. Upon the report, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Phnom Penh in 2021 to seek clarification and requested a site visit to the base by the Cambodia-based U.S. Defense Attaché. Washington insisted that the base, after two years of upgrading project, would turn into a “strategically important military outpost on the Gulf of Thailand” for China.¹⁵¹ The

¹⁴⁷ Sen, *Management of Cambodia Foreign Policy*, 6-7.

¹⁴⁸ Chanborei, in discussion with author, March 2024.

¹⁴⁹ Khmer Times, “U.S. coercive diplomacy has no market on China-Cambodia naval facility,” *CGTN*, 21 June 2022, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501098157/u-s-coercive-diplomacy-has-no-market-on-china-cambodia-naval-facility/>.

¹⁵⁰ Khmer Times, “U.S. coercive diplomacy has no market on China-Cambodia naval facility”.

¹⁵¹ Khmer Times, “U.S. coercive diplomacy has no market on China-Cambodia naval facility”.

Washington Post blatantly called the base a secretly-built facility for China's exclusive "military" use and a part of the country's "strategy to build a network of military facilities around the world in support of its aspirations to become a true global power".¹⁵² Ream Naval Base remains a subject of interest for great powers as they compete for influence in Southeast Asia.¹⁵³ Upon the report, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Phnom Penh in 2021 to seek clarification and requested a visit to the base by the Cambodia-based U.S. Defense Attaché. Despite Cambodia's efforts to clear doubts about a Chinese military presence at the Ream Naval Base, the U.S. suspicions has not receded. The Chinese newspaper, CGTN, called Washington's behavior and bashing on Cambodia's modernization project of its port as interference into its internal affairs and an act of "coercer diplomacy for selfish political gains".¹⁵⁴

Cambodia is in desperate need of upgrading its facilities at the Ream Naval Base to protect its maritime security. The Royal Cambodian Navy is poorly equipped and unable to track the movement and location of its vessels further out at sea. Additionally, the Ream Naval Base does not have adequate facilities to accommodate large warships, and its surrounding waters are too shallow to host large foreign vessels, and instead, Cambodia uses the nearby commercially run Sihanoukville Port to host visiting foreign vessels.¹⁵⁵ The Chinese-funded project at the Ream Naval Base aims at addressing those needs by providing the facilities and technologies including communication and surveillance systems, radar facilities critical for long-range shore-to-ship communication and tracking system of vessels out at sea. The waters surrounding will be deepened and wharves will be built to enable larger vessels to docks. The Cambodian official cited "China is funding the developmental project without any conditions attached. During the negotiations, the Chinese understood that Cambodia would not share control of the Ream Naval Base and that Phnom Penh would not take sides in the U.S.–China rivalry".¹⁵⁶ Cambodian and Chinese government have given repeated denials on the allegations that the Ream Naval Base will become "exclusive" Chinese military outpost, upon completion. Cambodia's constitution prohibits any foreign military base on its soil under any circumstances. In recent years, Ream became a subject of interests from major powers as they compete for influence in the region. The Cambodian government has been accused by the U.S. and its allies for allowing the base to be used by the Chinese military, a challenge to the U.S.' role in the Indo-Pacific and potentially

¹⁵² "China secretly building PLA naval facility in Cambodia", *The Washington Post*, 6 June 2022,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/06/06/cambodia-china-navy-base-ream/>.

¹⁵³ Abdul Rahman Yaacob, "Cambodia's Ream naval base attracts competing patrons," *East Asia Forum*, 5 September 2022, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/05/cambodias-ream-naval-base-attracts-competing-patrons/>

¹⁵⁴ Khmer Times, "U.S. coercive diplomacy has no market on China-Cambodia naval facility".

¹⁵⁵ Yaacob, "Cambodia's Ream naval base attracts competing patrons".

¹⁵⁶ Yaacob, "Cambodia's Ream naval base attracts competing patrons".

undermining regional stability. In the CNN report which cited from the Washington-based think tank the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) new analysis says “China is building toward more naval outposts, including satellite imagery that shows the remarkable development of the Ream Naval Base, sitting on a stubby peninsula jutting from the west coast of Cambodia into the Gulf of Thailand. And the PLA’s expanding global footprint and corresponding ability to conduct a wider range of missions, including limited warfighting, carries major risks for the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific as well as other operational theaters”.¹⁵⁷

However, both Cambodian and Chinese officials found the accusation to be absurd and have consistently dismissed those claims. Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh stated that the Ream Naval Base would not “become a Chinese military outpost” and emphasized that Cambodia’s constitution bars foreign military bases on its territory. Chinese officials asserted that “the base is an aid project” to strengthen Cambodia’s navy.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Fenghe responded to such claims at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, saying, “There is no such thing as for China to establish its military presence in Cambodia. There is no such thing out there”.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen affirmed that Cambodia “doesn’t allow foreign military bases irrespective of whether it is for naval forces, infantry forces, or air forces”.¹⁶⁰

In 2022, Cambodian government allowed 70 journalists both local and foreign to visit the naval base to validate its response. Cambodian government has confirmed that upon completion of the renovation, the base will be able to receive large naval vessels from partner countries, not just China, on training visits or any goodwill activities. According to Cambodian authorities, the renovation project is intended to foster defense capabilities of Cambodia on the part of its naval forces, and contribute to peace, stability and prosperity in the region. The U.S. demanded Cambodia to be transparent and not to allay U.S. suspicions on this matter.¹⁶¹ This was a smear and an attack on Cambodia and its relationship with China by the U.S. public opinion. Ream used to host a joint training between

¹⁵⁷ Brad Lendon and Simone McCarthy, “Blue-water ambitions: Is China looking beyond its neighborhood now it has the world’s largest navy?,” *CNN*, 2 September 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/01/asia/china-navy-overseas-military-bases-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>

¹⁵⁸ Lendon and McCarthy, “Blue-water ambitions: Is China looking beyond its neighborhood now it has the world’s largest navy?”.

¹⁵⁹ Sun Narin, “Chinese Defense Minister Denies: Military Presence in Cambodia,” *VOA Khmer*, 3 June 2019, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/chinese-defense-minister-denies-military-presence-in-cambodia/4943615.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Narin, “Chinese Defense Minister Denies: Military Presence in Cambodia”.

¹⁶¹ “Cambodia is not obligated to allay US suspicions”, *Global Times*, 28 July 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1295203.shtml>

Cambodia and the U.S. Navy and at that time, there was no objection from the United States.¹⁶² In December 2023, Chinese warships were first to dock in the newly renovated Ream Naval Base. Washington has closely monitored the report on the Chinese warships and didn't comment on the warships but the State Department spokesperson said the Washington "have serious concerns about PRC's plans for exclusive control over portions of Ream Naval Base".¹⁶³

Recently, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Cambodia and met with the President of the Senate, former Prime Minister Hun Sen, new Prime Minister Hun Manet, and Cambodia Defense Minister Tea Seiha. Austin's visit aimed to discuss opportunities to strengthen the U.S.-Cambodia bilateral defense relationship in support of regional peace and security. This included the possibility of resuming military training exchanges on disaster assistance and United Nations peacekeeping, training and exchanges on de-mining and unexploded ordnance clearance, and Cambodia's access to U.S. Professional Military Education programs.¹⁶⁴ Both sides also welcomed continued discussions about these issues between their respective defense establishments. Austin said of the meeting, "We had substantive conversations about ways to strengthen U.S.-Cambodian defense ties, and I'm looking forward to further dialogue".¹⁶⁵ Austin's visit marked a new development in Cambodia-U.S. relations, which had been declining since Cambodia allowed China to develop the Ream Naval Base. The visit intended to counteract gains made by China amid concerns over its growing presence at the Cambodian naval base.¹⁶⁶

On Ream Naval Base Modernization Policy, prescribed in the Nation Defense White Paper 2022, stipulated that "like other countries, Royal Cambodia Armed Forces has to develop its capabilities. The modernization of Ream Naval Base, which has been in motion for many years, is an integral part of the Royal Cambodian Navy's capability modernization plans. Ream Naval Base modernization is essential to the sovereign rights of Cambodia to serve its interests and security of the region. This modernization

¹⁶² "Cambodia is not obligated to allay US suspicions".

¹⁶³ Nectar Gan, "The first Chinese warships have docked at a newly expanded Cambodian naval base. Should the US be worried?," *CNN*, 6 December 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/07/asia/cambodia-ream-naval-base-chinese-warships-us-analysis/index.html>

¹⁶⁴ "Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Meetings With Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and Senior Cambodian Officials", *U.S. Department of Defense*, 4 June 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3795409/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-ills-meetings-with-cambodian-pri/>.

¹⁶⁵ Sebastian Strangio, "US Defense Secretary Austin Visits Cambodia for Talks With New Leadership," *The Diplomat*, 5 June 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/us-defense-secretary-austin-visits-cambodia-for-talks-with-new-leadership/>.

¹⁶⁶ "US Defense Secretary discusses military exchanges in visit to China ally Cambodia", *Reuters*, 4 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-defense-secretary-visits-cambodia-it-moves-closer-beijing-2024-06-04/>.

aims to effectively manage and control Cambodia's maritime domain and fully participate with other countries in safeguarding peace, and strengthening stability and security in the region. This modernization does not threaten any country because Cambodia does not allow any foreign military base on its sovereign territory against its Constitution".¹⁶⁷

In short, to navigate the complex security environment in the context of U.S.-China competition in the Indo-Pacific, Cambodia must maneuver its foreign policy wisely and strive to balance between the U.S. and China. Cambodia's foreign policy is primarily based on the interests of the country and its people, with due regard for the protection of sovereignty, independence, adherence to international rules, and territorial integrity. Cambodia continues to maintain existing friendships and partnerships while seeking opportunities to establish new ones. Cambodia will not side with one against another but will cooperate with all for mutual cooperation and development. Cambodia will firmly support the spirit of multilateralism and will not support one party at the expense of another. Cambodia strongly supports ASEAN and will work with other members to strengthen ASEAN towards building a shared community for all. Cambodia welcomes initiatives for the Indo-Pacific, provided those initiatives adhere to ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

Cambodia's internal political landscape and its implications to policy choices

Cambodia's position today is more secure than it was in the 1990s. Before 1998, Cambodia was divided and in a state of turmoil. Civil war continued to ravage the country and tear it apart. Cambodia's economy was backward, and its survival was ambiguous. It was in 1998 that Cambodia achieved total peace through the win-win policy engineered by former Prime Minister Hun Sen and the ruling CPP Party. In its last 500 years of history, Cambodia had not experienced internal peace and stability, let alone development or solidarity. Cambodia was weak and insecure. It suffered invasions from more powerful neighboring countries. Its territorial integrity was violated, and its sovereignty was interfered with. Without peace, there will be no development and no regard for people's lives.

Today, Cambodia enjoys peace under the ruling CPP. Security, stability, and social order are the bedrock of national development in every sector. As long as the CPP remains in power, Cambodia's foreign and security policy will remain unchanged in terms of its strategic interests, objectives, and direction.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Kingdom of Cambodia, "Chapter IV: On Policy", 12.

¹⁶⁸ Vannarith, in discussion with the author, February 2024.

With peace and development, we can build a strong defense to protect Cambodia's constitution, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Former Minister of Defense Tea Banh stated in the National Defense White Paper 2022, "My primary intent is to strengthen the defense foundation through a bonding connection between our defense forces and the population. This method would prove effective and timely in responding to all forms of threats from internal and external adversaries".¹⁶⁹

Cambodia's security policy begins at home, and a strong defense force is an important deterrent. Our foreign policy will be credible, recognized, and valued only if Cambodia is successful and strong economically and militarily, able to maintain peace, societal cohesiveness, unity, and domestic consensus on Cambodia's core interests and foreign policy priorities. In the realist theoretical context of International Relations, national security is closely related to the survival of states within the anarchic system of international politics that allows ongoing wars and conflicts. Therefore, the survival of the regime that rules the country is tantamount to the state's survival. Country leaders give great significance to regime survival, as changes in economics and politics always create new phenomena to challenge ruling regimes.¹⁷⁰ In view of this, and particularly understanding the tragic history of Cambodia through its periods of waxing and waning, policymakers in Cambodia give greater importance to the internal politics of national security as well as regime security.

Maintaining the current state of affairs is the top priority for Cambodia's leaders. Peace and stability are matters of life and death that must be protected at all costs. Prime Minister Hun Manet stated that without peace, there will be no development and prosperity for all Cambodians. To ensure peace and social order in the long run, Cambodia must be critical and vigilant regarding the risks and challenges that could pose threats to the regime. In the CPP Party Congress in January 2023, Party Chairman and Prime Minister Hun Sen urged party members and citizens to strengthen national unity and commit to preventing and fighting all forms of political extremism and extremist activities by any individual, group, or political organization that employ incitation to cause social division, unrest, insecurity, and aims to destroy peace, social order and political stability, in their ill-will attempt for regime change through rebellious tactics and in violation to the democratic principles and the Constitution of Cambodia.¹⁷¹ Any individual or organized group who commit such extremist acts will be met with severe punishment based on existing laws, in order to prevent war and national fragility from happening again in Cambodia.

¹⁶⁹ Tea Banh, "Keynote address", in *National Defense White Paper* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Defense, 2022).

¹⁷⁰ Brian Job, *The Insecurity Dilemma: National, Regime, and State Securities in Third World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁷¹ Sen, *Management of Cambodia Foreign Policy*, 7.

Cambodia understands the grave threats posed by the external security environment, particularly during the period of U.S.-China competition in the region. Geopolitics will become more unprecedented and unpredictable. The global security environment will continue to change over time, becoming increasingly uncertain and a concern for the region and the world. Similarly, in Vannarith's words, "Regional order will be less predictable, more complex, and volatile. Security challenges and risks are on the rise. Countries need to prepare for the worst-case scenario. Cambodia needs to constantly adapt to new realities and adjust its foreign and defense strategy and posture".¹⁷²

To cope with the evolving situation, Cambodia's foreign policy positions should reflect the changing strategic realities while maintaining its independence and freedom. At the same time, Cambodia must be able to anticipate possible frictions and challenges, remain alert to dangers, seize opportunities amid difficulties, and be open to broader relationships with other countries for mutual interests. China will remain the most important strategic and economic partner, but this does not mean that Cambodia puts all its eggs in one basket.¹⁷³ Cambodia also values its relationship with the U.S. and often calls upon the U.S. to soften its position towards Cambodia so that both sides can elevate their relationship to new heights. Cambodia has been diversifying its strategic and economic partnerships to maintain a balanced, independent foreign policy, with its immediate neighbors such as Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam as top foreign policy priorities, followed by Japan, ROK, Australia, India, France, Germany, the U.S., and the UK. Cambodia will continue to strengthen its relationships with old friends while making new friends. Besides, Cambodian Armed Forces has actively participated in various cooperation activities within the framework of ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Cambodia also plays active role in promoting the establishment of practical cooperation of the ADMM-Plus EWG and the Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative (SEAMLEI).

Conclusions

The world is in an inflection time. The unipolar moment has been gone for some time now. China has become another pole in the system alongside the U.S. and Russia. China's rise and growing influence in the Indo-Pacific have threatened U.S. hegemonic domination. The security architecture under the U.S.-led bilateral alliance and partnership in the Asia and Pacific region, known as hub-and-spoke, has been elevated to a "new convergence" concept and minilateral structures such as the QUAD and

¹⁷² Vannarith, in discussion with the author, February 2024.

¹⁷³ Vannarith, in discussion with the author, February 2024.

AUKUS, in an attempt to encircle and counter China in all domains including economics, geopolitics, technology, and security. The U.S. has promoted the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy with the clear purpose of securing freedom for all nations without coercion from external forces, respect for sovereignty and international law, and freedom of navigation.

China's claim to much of the South China Sea is a major security concern for the Southeast Asia region. The South China Sea dispute involves contested claims between China and several Southeast Asian nations. Another layer of this dispute is between the U.S. and China, making the South China Sea the most contested body of water and a hotbed of geopolitical rivalry. The U.S. claims that it has a stake in the South China Sea, particularly regarding freedom of navigation and overflight. Despite China's warnings of escalating tensions, the U.S. continues to challenge China's claims by sending naval vessels and carrier groups through the area, leading to occasional incidents between U.S. and Chinese naval vessels.

The world is talking about the Thucydides' trap, the unavoidable war or the inevitable war, particularly in predicting a potential conflict between the U.S. and China. It's hard to imagine how it might start, but it's easy to foresee the devastating consequences. If war were to break out between the U.S. and China, the most likely site would be the Indo-Pacific region, with the South China Sea being one of the prominent hotspots that could trigger such a conflict. In the worst-case scenario, the entire region risks a nuclear exchange, although this is very unlikely. Both the U.S. and China have nuclear deterrent capabilities that could prevent either side from escalating into a full-scale armed conflict. Consequently, there is a growing discussion about the possibility of proxy wars, similar to the current Russia-Ukraine conflict. This scenario is more likely if the situation in the region is not carefully managed and tensions continue to rise.

Even though Cambodia's position today is far more secure than it was 20 years ago, its challenges as a small state in a dangerous world will remain perennial. Only if Cambodia is strong at home can its foreign policy be credible and valued. Cambodia's strength lies in having strong and visionary leadership that can consistently act in the country's best interests and maintain a domestic consensus on its core interests and foreign policy priorities. Cambodia's survival will depend on its ability to be prosperous and maintain a cohesive society. Cambodia aims to keep all old friends and partners while expanding relationships with as many countries as possible, based on mutual respect, mutual interests, and win-win interdependence. Cambodia upholds international laws enshrined in the UN Charter, the ASEAN Charter, and other internationally recognized organizations. This is a fundamental principle for

Cambodia's foreign policy conduct. In the midst of crises, Cambodia should strive to calculate and seize opportunities while being flexible, nimble, and alert to the danger. Thus, Cambodia's international position will be recognized and credited, and its survival as a nation in the complex security environment will be secured for the long future.