



RCAS Commentary

Trump's Asia-Pacific Playbook: More Weapons, More Uncertainty

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About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

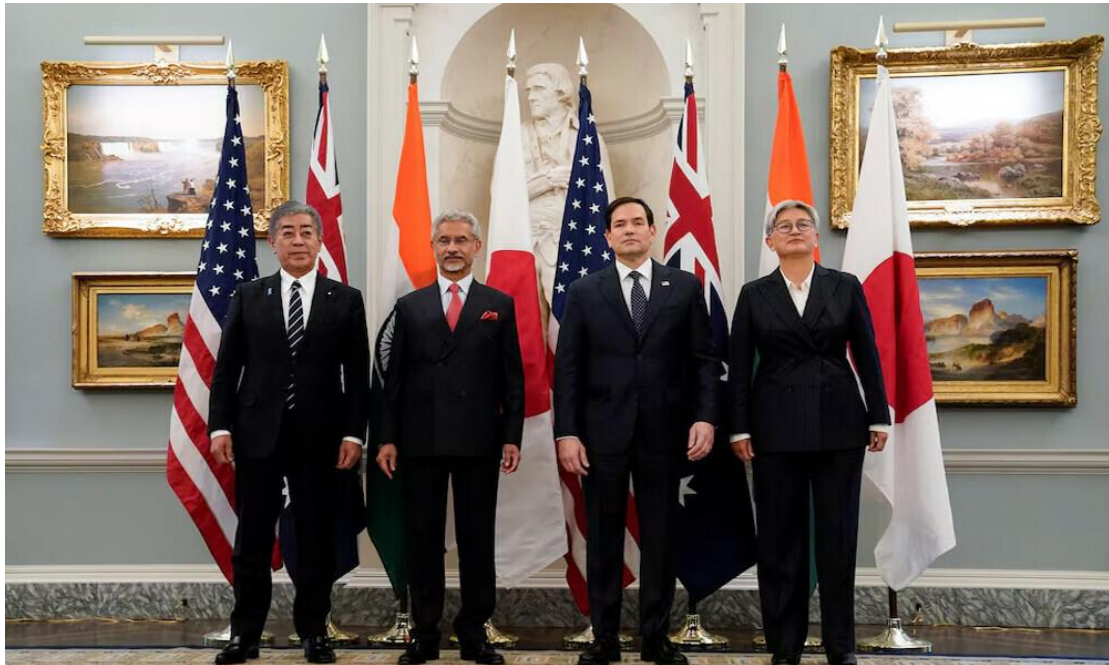
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The Asia-Pacific region began to exhibit signs of easing major geopolitical tensions in late 2024, but has started to heat up again following President Trump's return to power in the White House. During the 'easing' period, although low-level disputes persisted in the vast region, in the South China Sea, and in cross-strait relations, the risk of a conflict involving regional heavyweights was not imminent.



▲ U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio meets QUAD Foreign Ministers on his Day 1 in office. (China-US Focus).

Starting from around mid-2024, relations between Australia, Japan, and India, three key members of Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), with China began to improve. Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia in June 2024, followed by a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in November on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, ended the trade war, putting the relationship back on track. The summit between President Xi and Indian Prime Minister Modi led to the de-escalation of tension and demilitarization of the Sino-Indian border in rather a quick time. China-Japan relations also saw a positive shift following a meeting between Xi and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba during the 31st APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in

November. Trump's return to the White House has brought these countries back into the US geopolitical agenda in the Asia-Pacific.

On January 21, 2025, on his first day in office, the new Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, held a meeting with his Quad counterparts from Australia, India, and Japan. Four ministers reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing cooperation and emphasized a "shared commitment to strengthening a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," an implied reference to China's 'assertiveness' in the South China Sea. Rubio was a well-known China hawk, his starting the new portfolio by activating the Quad reinforced this impression. This meeting followed visits by the top leaders of Japan, India, and Australia to the US.

On February 7, 2025, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba met with U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House. This meeting marked Ishiba's first official visit to the U.S. since taking office and underscored the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance. During their discussions, Trump reaffirmed the US's total commitment to Japan's security. Ishiba announced plans for Japan to increase investments in the U.S. to US\$1 trillion and discussed raising Japan's defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2027, aligning with U.S. defense strategies against China. The meeting was described as cordial and reinforced bilateral ties in the face of regional security challenges. While cross-strait relations do not directly pertain to US-Japan bilateral relations, both countries included it in their joint statement. This elicited a response from Beijing and gratitude from Taiwan.

Within a week of Ishiba's visit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Trump in the White House. Although the Trump-Modi meeting took place shortly after Trump's announcement of intended tariffs on various trade partners, including India, under shared geopolitical interests, both leaders emphasized their friendship and mutual respect during a joint press conference, whereas Trump reaffirmed strong cooperation among Quad members. The US President specifically promised the sale of advanced weapons worth billions of dollars to India, including the possibility of an F-35 fighter jet in the future. Modi's efforts to acquire weapons and strengthen the alliance with the US come at a time of rapid improvement in China-India relations.

At the same time as Modi, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles was in the US to meet his counterpart, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, and members of Congress. Among Quad leaders, while Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has not yet met Donald Trump in person, the two leaders held a 40-minute telephone conversation. The discussion focused on defense, AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States), Australia's nuclear-powered submarine program, technology sharing, and strategic coordination, among other topics.

In addition to reactivating the Quad, Trump's apparent de-militarizing measures would, in essence, lead to further militarization in the Asia-Pacific. His demand that allies share a greater burden of the US security measures and expand their defense budget to at least two percent on the one hand and relaxing sales of US weapons for commercial purposes on the other in practice adds to militarization. Japan expressed its resolve to expand defense spending by up to two percent by 2027. For 2025, with a significant increase of 9.4 percent from the previous year, Japan's defense budget reached approximately US\$55 billion. Under its national security strategy developed in 2022, Tokyo has accelerated militarization, with most of its purchases coming from the US. The Modi government, having already allocated \$250 billion for a 10-year military modernization initiative, will also expand its weapon procurement efforts. Taiwan is currently in discussions with the US to buy arms valued at US\$7 to US\$10 billion. Security is a convenient excuse for politicians to ignite nationalism and channel resources from development to defense. For the US, these purchases will support its defense contractors.

The ripple effect of Trump's push for militarization is reaching the farthest parts of the Asia-Pacific. New Zealand, the most neutral nation in the Pacific, is reviving its colonial and imperial identity, aligning with the Anglosphere and becoming part of the US military-industrial complex. Wellington expressed outright displeasure that the President of the Cook Islands did not show the contents of the agreement it signed with China on 15 February.

What is notably interesting is that alongside the push for alliances, Trump is advocating for major powers to cut their defense budgets and reduce the number of nuclear weapons. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun stated that the US should take the lead in setting an example for military spending cuts.

Trump's Asia-Pacific Strategy Faces Headwinds

While Trump's policies mirror the policies of his first term (2017-2021), much has changed in the Asia-Pacific over the past eight years. Unlike late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020), who proved to be a key US ally in the region and the main force behind the resuscitating of the Quad, Japan's current Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba lacks charisma and leads a weak government. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured 240 seats in the Lok Sabha, down from 303 seats during his second term. The US receives strong support from the current governments of the Philippines and Taiwan, but most of the Asia-Pacific countries are loath to become part of a great power rivalry. There is a louder call for new non-alignment and new partnerships than dancing on the tone of military paybooks.

As the ASEAN Chair, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim emphasized that ASEAN and Malaysia will uphold a non-aligned stance. Addressing a conference on February 17, 2025, he opposed economic coercion and unilateral actions, an implied reference to Trump's tariff war. Anwar also highlighted the importance of diversifying partnerships beyond traditional allies, aiming to strengthen ties with emerging economies like China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to ensure ASEAN's strategic relevance in a multipolar world. Indonesia echoed similar views on these issues.

Despite its assertive agenda, the US, under President Trump, faces tangible challenges in the Asia-Pacific. Apart from select countries, the majority prefer to steer clear of geopolitical rivalries. If these countries can handle their own affairs and dismiss outside agendas, they will attain economic development.

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