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A new military grouping is emerging in the Indo-Pacific

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The Pacific part of the larger Indo-Pacific has witnessed increased military and diplomatic cooperation in recent times among the US and its regional military partners. Major military formations like the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) are being formed to provide nuclear submarines for Australia. A Japan-led consortium comprising the United Kingdom and Italy is developing a 6th generation fighter aircraft known as the Tempest. Although the UK is taking the front seat in the development process, Japan would be the major customer. Both programs aim to bolster the military capabilities of the US allies along the Pacific coast and deter China from achieving regional hegemony in East Asia. The US strategy is to constrain China within the first island chain area comprising the three seas, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea, which will allow unfettered military manoeuvre for the US in the vast oceanic theatre. Similarly, US military allies Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand are engaging in cohesive diplomatic activities to promote a unified action plan in support of US interests in the region.

As the principal military power in the Pacific theatre with a large number of military bases, both self-sustained and ally bases, the United States seeks to deter China's ambition for military superiority in the Western Pacific. Gaining military superiority both in the maritime and aerial domains in East Asia is crucial to fulfilling China's long-held dream of unifying Taiwan with the mainland, regaining the disputed territories in the East and South China Seas, and becoming a 'recognised' global power. President Xi Jinping announced his 'China Dream' in 2014, saying that China should complete the above goals by the middle of the century.¹ Given the conditions of security ambitions and economic visions merging, some argue that China might complete the security objectives, such as the unification of Taiwan, by 2035, when China becomes the largest economy in the world by doubling the size of the economy, as announced by President Xi in October 2017 at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).² Few others argue that China will finish the Taiwan problem by 2027,³ based on Xi's assertion while delivering his report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party on October 16, 2022, in which Xi called for the need to 'consolidate national security, and fulfil the goals for the centenary of the People's Liberation Army in 2027'.⁴ For the US, it has to be ready to confront China either by 2027 or by 2035.

The US has two priorities in its strategy towards the Western Pacific: firstly, the confrontation has to be restricted within the region itself so that it does not reach the US homeland, and secondly, its security commitments to its allies in East Asia need to be preserved. The US alliance system in East Asia is rooted not in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) model of collective security principles but in a 'hub-and-spoke system'⁵ in which the US is committed to guaranteeing the

security of its partners and not vice versa. As a result, countering China and preserving the security of its military partners is a major US responsibility. Withdrawing from such commitments will lead to a freewheeling of China in the Western Pacific and a global crisis for American power as Washington considers China its principal competitor.⁶

To counter China's challenges, Washington has adopted an 'active denial' or 'deterrence by denial' strategy.⁷ This strategy focuses on 'deploying resilient and primarily defensive US and allied forces to blunt and disrupt the Chinese attack while preparing for a focused counterattack later.'⁸ It emphasises maintaining the US military's forward presence in the region and leveraging allies' strengths, including geographic position, as well as current or potential niche military capabilities.⁹ Australia and Japan are bolstering their offensive capabilities with nuclear submarines and 6th generation fighter aircraft, respectively, which will be force-multipliers in the US strategy to counter China. They will also work as the first line of defence for the US, suggesting that China will have insurmountable challenges to establish its aerial superiority even within the first island area.

The US and its military allies in the Pacific region have also launched diplomatic pushback against China. The leaders of South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand attended the NATO meeting held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 11 and 12, 2023, and discussed the possibilities of cooperation between NATO and them. Even NATO had planned to set up a liaison office in Tokyo but deferred the decision due to resistance from France and others.¹⁰

US President Joe Biden hosted a meeting of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol at Camp David on August 18, against the backdrop of increasing debate on a Ukraine-model invasion of Taiwan by China. The three countries agreed to deepen military and economic cooperation and cautioned China of its "dangerous and aggressive behaviour" in the South China Sea.¹¹ They have committed to 'consult promptly with each other during crises and to coordinate responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting common interests'.

The first-ever standalone trilateral meeting suggests that Japan and South Korea can work together to meet the challenges from China, North Korea, and now Russia, despite their lingering World War II memories. Political cooperation between Japan and South Korea is still far from normal. However, the coming together of the US and its allies will provide abundant infrastructure for military use against China all along the Pacific's Asian coasts, including the Philippines. In April, the US and the Philippines agreed to use four more bases for the US military, apart from the five other bases agreed upon in 2014.¹² To bolster aerial capabilities against the Chinese threat, Japan and the US

signed an agreement to purchase 105 F-35 joint strike fighters (63 F-35A and 43 F-35B) in 2019, and the delivery has almost been completed.¹³ Besides, in August, both countries agreed to jointly develop an interceptor missile to counter hypersonic warheads being developed by China, Russia, and North Korea.¹⁴ The US is placing its anti-hypersonic missile defence system on Guam. In contrast, the Japanese missile defence system will be able to protect US Carrier Strike Groups (CSG) deployed in the Western Pacific.

India is also a beneficiary of the US' 'active denial' strategy by getting high-end defence technology and equipment from Washington to bolster its deterrence against China in the Himalayas as well as in the Indian Ocean. With advanced defence technology and systems from Washington, India can manage itself to counter the Chinese threat in both the land and maritime theatres. This will allow the US to focus more on the Pacific theatre to counter the Chinese threat, leaving the Indian Ocean free from competition and rivalry.

NOTES:

¹ Jane Perlez, "Leader Asserts China's Growing Importance on Global Stage" *The New York Times*, November 30, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/01/world/asia/leader-asserts-chinas-growing-role-on-global-stage.html>. Accessed on September 1, 2023

² Katsuji Nakazawa, "No successor needed: Xi Jinping's dream extends to 2035", *Nikkei Asia*, November 1, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/No-successor-needed-Xi-Jinping-s-dream-extends-to-2035>. Accessed on September 1, 2023

³ Amy Hawkins, "Taiwan foreign minister warns of conflict with China in 2027", *The Guardian*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/21/taiwan-foreign-minister-warns-of-conflict-with-china-in-2027#:~:text=US%20intelligence%20believes%20that%20Xi,be%20reunited%20with%20the%20mainland>. Accessed on September 5, 2023

⁴ Xinhua, " Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China", October 25, 2022. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202210/25/WS6357e484a310fd2b29e7e7de.html>. Accessed on September 5, 2023

⁵ Hub-and-spoke system is based on bilateral military alliances that the US signed with countries from East and Southeast Asia to maintain the US military presence in the region and also to guarantee the security of partner countries.

⁶ Bloomberg, "US labels China as nation's top competitor, capable of reshaping global order", *Mint*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/us-labels-china-as-nation-s-top-competitor-capable-of-reshaping-global-order-11665603392742.html>. Accessed on September 1, 2023

⁷ Rachel Esplin Odell, *et al*, "Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia", *Quincy Paper no. 8*, Quincy Institute, June 22, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/#authors>. Accessed on September 8, 2023

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, "Why the United States Needs an Active Denial Strategy for Asia", *RAND Commentary*, June 8, 2015, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/06/why-the-united-states-needs-an-active-denial-strategy.html>. Accessed on September 4, 2023

¹⁰ Justin McCurry, "France opposed to opening of Nato liaison office in Japan, official says", *The Guardian*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/07/france-opposed-to-opening-of-nato-liaison-office-in-japan-official-says>. Accessed on September 6, 2023

¹¹ *Reuters*, "US, South Korea, and Japan condemn China, agree to deepen military ties", August 19, 2023,

¹² AFP, "Philippines announces four more military bases U.S. troops can use", *The Hindu*, April 3, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/philippines-announces-four-more-military-bases-us-troops-can-use/article66695154.ece>. Accessed on September 3, 2023

¹³ Valerie Insinna, "US gives the green light to Japan's \$23B F-35 buy", *Defense News*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/2020/07/09/us-gives-the-green-light-to-japans-massive-23b-f-35-buy/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%E2%80%94The%20United%20States%20on,the%20Lockheed%20Martin%2Dproduced%20jet>. Accessed on September 10, 2023

¹⁴ *Reuters*, "U.S., Japan to develop hypersonic missile interceptor – Yomiuri", August 13, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-japan-develop-hypersonic-missile-interceptor-yomiuri-2023-08-13/>. Accessed on September 11, 2023