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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wirth, C., & Jenne, N. (2022). Filling the void: The Asia-Pacific problem of order and emerging Indo-Pacific regional multilateralism. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43(2), 213-242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2036506>

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## Filling the void: The Asia-Pacific problem of order and emerging Indo-Pacific regional multilateralism

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### ABSTRACT

Thirty years after the downfall of the Soviet-led communist bloc, the United States-led liberal international order is seen as coming to an end. Policymakers have converged on the need to safeguard the “rules-based order” across the newly coined “Indo-Pacific” region. However, policy and scholarly debates lack clarity about what exactly is to be preserved, and why the terms of the “rules-based order” and the “Indo-Pacific” have rapidly found their way into policy debates despite their contested meaning. Analyzing developments in regional multilateralism, we find that mainstream discourses purport static conceptions of order, which are often conflated with United States-centered trans-Pacific alliance relationships. The ensuing problem of order stems in large part from the fact that multilateral projects for building alternate orders, undertaken since the early 1990s, have remained far below their potential. We conclude that emerging forms of multilateral cooperation across the enlarged “Indo-Pacific” region have partially filled this void.

**KEYWORDS** Indo-Pacific; Asia-Pacific; regionalism; multilateralism; liberal international order; rules-based order

Thirty years after the downfall of the Soviet communist bloc, the United States-led liberal international order is widely seen as coming to an end (Daalder & Lindsay, 2018; Ikenberry, 2017). The Trump Administration’s disdain for democratic processes and institutions of global governance has arguably been the most obvious sign of its crumbling from within. China’s increasing power to shape international norms and institutions represents the major external challenge. The former put the latter into stark relief and has rekindled debates about the end of the “West.”

These anxieties are not entirely new. Facing the rise of “Japan Inc.” in the 1980s, scholars and strategists already considered the impending decline of

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U.S. hegemonic power and coming conflict with an Asian challenger (Morris, 2011; Nymalm, 2020). The discourse's current incarnation focuses on the implications for the liberal international order's pillars of free trade, intergovernmental organizations, and the rule of international law (Ikenberry, 2013). In particular, China's weathering of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, rolling out of the Belt and Road Initiative, expansion in the South China Sea, and seemingly more successful managing of the Covid-19 pandemic propelled the debate about the United States' staying power (Clarke & Ricketts, 2017) and the liberal international order's resilience (Acharya, 2014; Iida, 2015; Ikenberry, 2018) to new heights.

Policymakers in East Asia, the United States, and Europe appear to have found an answer to the insecurities produced by the international power transition that has been particularly visible in the Asia-Pacific region. They converge on the need to stabilize or preserve, and, if necessary, militarily defend, what has become known as the "rules-based order." To this end, they have fielded strategies for managing economic and security political affairs across the newly coined "Indo-Pacific" meta-region (Australian Government, 2012; European Union, 2021; France, 2021; Germany, 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021; White House, 2017).

Paradoxically, existing research has demonstrated that the liberal international, or rules-based, order has not been particularly liberal in the sense of embodying universal respect for democracy and civil liberties, sovereign equality, international law, and multilateral institutions, especially outside the "West's" Euro-Atlantic core (Duncombe & Dunne, 2018; Jahn, 2018). With multilateralism as one of its cornerstones, Washington played a key role in facilitating a peaceful European order through gradual economic and political integration. In East Asia, however, great power politics, often taking recourse to decidedly illiberal practices, have been dominating international relations (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002; Parmar, 2018). Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to answer the following questions: What do scholars and practitioners mean when they refer to the liberal international or the rules-based order, in relation to the Indo-Pacific? And how can the rise and proliferation of these two ideas of the "Indo-Pacific" and the "liberal international order" amongst countries within the region and beyond be explained, despite their contested meanings?

Based on an understanding of order that highlights the social foundations underpinning stable and predictable relations between states (Bisley, 2019, p. 363), the present article makes it evident that the mainstream discourses emanating from foreign and security policy elites in Australia, Japan, and the United States purport static conceptions of a singular liberal international or rules-based order, which are often conflated with U.S.-centered trans-Pacific bilateral alliance relationships, also known as the hub-and-spoke or San Francisco system, established in the 1950s. As we demonstrate empirically,

this order has been outgrown by changing realities especially since the end of the Cold War and has therefore become increasingly costly to maintain. Nevertheless, our analysis shows how conservative elites on both sides of the Pacific have, rather consistently, opposed initiatives for adjusting the hub-and-spoke manifestation of international order to changing conditions. In particular, East Asian leaders promoting the development of regional institutions have faced strong resistance from conservative domestic interest groups. They have also had to deal with U.S. policymakers who have been wary of East Asian initiatives *and* reluctant to lead the building of inclusive Asia-Pacific-wide institutional structures for the reconstruction of regional order.

Following this line of argument, we posit that the Indo-Pacific regional concept is a continuation of previous attempts by East Asian policymakers to fill the void that stems from the failure to adapt the existing order to the changing post-Cold War conditions. Although the Trump Administration is often credited with its creation, the Indo-Pacific initiative is an Asian one. This explains its rapid proliferation across the region. While the emerging Indo-Pacific meta-region is unlikely to become formally institutionalized, we demonstrate how this enlarged domain of governance may facilitate the creation of a new order commensurate to contemporary circumstances by accommodating both the United States and China and allowing other states to find a middle ground between the great powers.

In the next section, we outline key arguments in the scholarly debates on regional order and regionalism of the Asia-Pacific region, and thereby disentangle the trans-Pacific hub-and-spoke alliance system from the ideal of the liberal international order. In the third section, we show how transformative change that has occurred since the early 1990s came to place increasing burden on the institutions of the postwar Asia-Pacific international order. In the fourth section, we demonstrate that the United States' ambivalent stance on initiatives for the promotion of regional multilateralism, combined with nationalist recalcitrance in East Asian capitals, meant that efforts to reconstruct regional order have remained far below their potential. In the fifth section, we discuss the emergence of Indo-Pacific multilateralism as a response to the problem of order. The final section concludes.

### **The liberal international order and regional multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific**

This study relies on a conceptualization of order that makes it possible to capture how both formal and informal institutions have developed over time in the context of hierarchical power relations (Buzan, 2018). Accordingly, order is defined as a “set of rules, institutions, and shared values which foster a stable and predictable pattern of relations among members of an international system” (Bisley, 2019, p. 363). Because international

order rests on social foundations, these patterns follow from the institutionalized, rule-governed practices of managing relations between states and between powerful states in particular (Alagappa, 2003; Bull, 2002).

The United States-promoted order that has defined the Asia-Pacific since the beginnings of the San Francisco system in the 1950s is a hegemonic order. Unlike primacy, which relies on superior power to credibly threaten destruction, hegemonic orders are made from social compacts that denote “the reciprocal and conditional exchange of promises” (Goh, 2019, p. 620). Smaller states trade their acceptance of power differentials for promises by the hegemon to uphold the order. The modalities of these compacts, or bargains, are dynamic, but their persistence requires a basic consensus about three components: the delimitation of the concerned domain of governance, the designation of the legitimate actors, and the distribution of rights and responsibilities (Clark et al., 2018). Consequently, a crisis will occur when the renegotiation of one or more of the social compact’s three components fails (Hurd, 2007). As Goh (2019, p. 621) emphasized, “the hegemon risks decline if these negotiations are unsuccessful; conversely, its authority is reified” if they succeed.

Empirically, it is difficult to distinguish between the failure to agree on the social compact’s three components and an ongoing process of negotiation, given that orders are always dynamic and in flux. Therefore, we draw on Reus-Smit’s (2007) discussion of international legitimacy crises. Reus-Smit argued that an actor’s or institution’s crisis of legitimacy reveals itself when

the level of social recognition that its identity, interests, practices, norms or procedures are rightful declines to the point where the actor or institution must either adapt (by reconstituting the social basis of its legitimacy, or by investing more heavily in material practices of coercion or bribery) or face disempowerment. (p. 158)

Thus, empirically observable actions, such as the reinforcement of deterrence postures, indicate an actor’s and institution’s need to compensate for their failures to adjust to changing conditions.

The theoretical and conceptual framework outlined thus far allows us to assess practices of “‘doing’ liberal world ordering” (Dunne et al., 2013, p. 10) rather than simply presuming the existence of a universal liberal or rules-based international order, an assumption that previous research has shown to be wrong (Duncombe & Dunne, 2018; Jahn, 2018). While the Kantian ideals of “peace through law, peace through free-trade, and peace through democracy” (Flockhart, 2013, p. 72) underpin liberal aspirations, actual practice has often downplayed or simply ignored contradictions and discontinuities within liberal projects. Thus, throughout the Cold War, U.S. decision makers had prioritized the fight against Communism. Therefore, especially in countries liberated from imperial Japanese rule, they tolerated, and often enabled, conservative if not authoritarian elites’ rise to power. In

return for these elites' support against Communism, they traded opportunities for rapid economic development and (regime) security guarantees. Internationally, these bargains became institutionalized in 1951 through the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan and bilateral security treaties between the United States and Japan, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, and, in 1953, with South Korea. However, the resulting hub-and-spoke system is not the same order as the liberal international order purports to be.

The starkest example of conflating the hub-and-spoke system with the liberal international order is arguably the recent appearance of assertions that the latter, conceived of as a coherent set of norms and institutions that has existed for more than 70 years (that is, since 1945), has faced existential external threats only in present times. However, the uncertainty about the future of the liberal international order is largely due to the fact that this order has never fully lived up to its promise in the Asia-Pacific region and can therefore hardly be preserved or brought back. What is in crisis, instead, is the post-war bilateral alliance system, as we will show further below. Recognizing this historical background opens ways for assessing current developments with regard to the newly conceived Indo-Pacific construct and, ultimately, for thinking about alternate future trajectories. What does the rapid proliferation of the Indo-Pacific idea mean for the future of regional order?

In view of the United States' relative decline, the existing literature charts five orders that are commonly considered to succeed the Cold War era structure. These were aptly summarized by Acharya (2014): an East Asian community, a Sino-American concert/condominium, Chinese hegemony, a China-centered hierarchy, and an anarchic system reminiscent of early twentieth-century Europe. We concur with Acharya's assessment that none of these scenarios is likely to materialize. While earlier forecasts of an emerging East Asian community turned out to be teleologically optimistic, the deepening Sino-American antagonism renders a concert or condominium unlikely. Predictions of China's rise to regional dominance or hegemony are similarly misguided. They ignore countervailing societal and political realities within China, such as the size of public debt, economic inequality, environmental degradation and, not least, the impending demographic contraction. Regarding international relations, they overestimate Chinese normative power, underestimate widespread resistance from within East Asia, and tend to ignore the fact that Chinese leaders lack strong and reliable allies. Due to Beijing's inability "to convince the region that China can offer public goods, does not threaten their interests, shares common social goals, and can play the hegemonic ordering role" (Goh, 2019, p. 618), East Asian governments still place considerable trust and hope in the United States (Hamilton-Hart, 2012; Wuthnow, 2018).

Most importantly, however, forecasts of a Chinese hegemony fail to understand the nature and foundations of the current international order. Established after the Second World War, this order is based on the successful U.S.-led rebuilding of the defeated axis powers and their subsequent serving as regional anchors (Katzenstein, 2005). Thus, China's rise notwithstanding, U.S. hegemony is unlikely to end as long as post-war international institutions remain in place *and* China is unable to offer generally acceptable solutions to the principal problems of our time.<sup>1</sup> This leaves the scenario of a coming anarchy. However, this view is as teleological as its East Asian community opposite. Warnings about such a future tend to rest on the belief that the United States and its allies must carry a pre-determined "burden" of stabilizing the region. Therefore, Acharya's (2014) proposal of an alternate "consociational" or "multiplex" order in which dynamics of conflict and cooperation coexist appears both more realistic and desirable. However, while his theory-oriented reasoning is sound, this proposition appears too complex to provide clear policy guidance and is hence unlikely to alleviate policy-makers' anxieties about the future of international order. Therefore, we direct attention to regional multilateralism as a means to sustain visions for peaceful futures, which are required (for a hegemon) to recreate "a distinctive, and acceptable, pattern of order" (Clark, 2011, p. 24).

The contribution of regional multilateralism to order-building is not limited to reducing transaction costs and constraining states' otherwise inherently conflictual behavior. Instead, we see them as both means for and manifestations of imagining alternate, more peaceful futures through mitigating the fundamental uncertainties that have been weighing on East Asian policymakers and strategists' minds after the Cold War ended and China appeared increasingly bigger on their cognitive horizons. In other words, "multilateralism is not order-building in and of itself," and what precise form a future order takes will therefore depend on both the relative power position of states and their agreed modes of conflict and cooperation (Goh, 2018, p. 48). In Ba's (2020) words: "different social purposes translate into different multilateralisms" (p. 261).

Before assessing regional cooperation initiatives as attempts to address the problem of order, the next section empirically substantiates the crisis of the hub-and-spoke system. We demonstrate how costly material practices of power have gradually been replacing normative power. Coercive order making, such as in relation to the U.S.-Japan alliance, the ensuing conflict on the Korean Peninsula, and China's increasing economic and political weight, points to the failure of renegotiating the existing social compacts.

### **Increasing strains on the hub-and-spoke system**

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, uncertainty arose about what compact would succeed the bipolar international structure. Concerned about

legitimizing their long-standing rule, the elites in Beijing, Pyongyang, and later also others elsewhere, albeit with less repressive methods, sought to uphold existing social bargains. While observers generally agree that the United States' continued commitment has been stabilizing the region as it underwent deep socio-economic and political transformations (Acharya, 2014, p. 160), recent developments suggest that adjustments, especially in terms of the distribution of rights and responsibilities among the established actors, were insufficient. The post-war order's declining legitimacy has placed new demands on successive U.S. administrations and their East Asian counterparts. The following will demonstrate that efforts to maintain regional order have therefore become increasingly costly and had detrimental effects for stability in East Asia.

### ***The costs of Japan's failure to re-engage East Asia***

The U.S.-Japan alliance constitutes the key pillar, or institutionalized bargain, supporting the East Asian or Asia-Pacific post-war order. In return for military basing rights and other support for the struggle against Communism, the United States had welcomed Japan back into the Western international society of states when signing the Peace or San Francisco Treaty and the Security Treaty with Japan in 1951 (Dower, 1999). However, the turning of a recent enemy into an ally, thereby shielding Japanese elites from facing their wartime past, would have lasting effects. Conservative leaders around the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), almost continuously in power since 1955, were unable to exploit authoritarian neighbors' economic needs for changing perceptions of Japan. At the same time, early Japanese efforts to engage East Asia through multilateral frameworks after the end of global bipolarity (Kantei, 1994) and reassure "countries which are worried about the future direction of Japanese defense policy" (Sato, 1991), met resistance from Washington. Japan, according to influential U.S. think tank analysts, officials, and academics, could not be lost to a possibly emerging Asian bloc (Cronin & Green, 1994, p. 31). Joining hands with conservative factions within the LDP and Japanese bureaucracy, U.S. officials sought to prevent Japan from "drifting" away and instead "anchored" it in the U.S. orbit through the deepening and expansion of the U.S.-Japan alliance (Armitage & Nye, 2012; Funabashi, 1999).

Hence, enduring historical revisionism, combined with security political bilateralism, not only prevented Japan from finding a compromise on four disputed Kurile islands and concluding World War II through a peace treaty with Russia. It also complicated the building of stable relations with China and inhibited the establishment of diplomatic ties with North Korea. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006) had the will and power to reach out to the famine-ravaged and politically isolated "Hermit



Kingdom.” Yet, despite rhetorical support, his audacious 2002 and 2004 summits in Pyongyang raised great concerns in Washington (Cronin, 2005). Despite significant progress on resolving it, the “North Korea threat” has been instrumentalized to counter criticisms of Japan’s imperial past and used to advance nationalist visions of a Japan liberated from the “shackles” of its pacifist constitution from 1947 (Hughes, 2009; Samuels, 2010).

The first complete transfer of ruling power away from the LDP to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009 did not change the country’s role within the hub-and-spoke system. Although attempting to resolve controversies around U.S. bases on Okinawa differently, the DPJ clearly supported a robust military posture toward China and a strong alliance. Thus, its more conciliatory approach to controversial history issues only temporarily mitigated the US dilemma that attempts to strengthen the alliance would also lead to greater demands from Tokyo while stirring suspicions amongst Japan’s rivals. Taken aback by the DPJ’s landslide victory, the influential epistemic community around the U.S.-Japan alliance interpreted demands for the reduction of troops on Okinawa and the proposal of an East Asian Community as a prelude for abandoning the security treaty. Therefore, conservative trans-Pacific interest groups worked toward the DPJ’s downfall (Jerdén, 2017). At the same time, LDP-linked circles’ efforts to rectify what they have seen as a “masochistic” view of the imperial past aroused South Korean nationalism and seriously hampered trilateral U.S.-Japan-South Korea security cooperation. In 2019, this conflict boiled over into a trade dispute, leaving Washington at a loss of ideas about how to handle its quarrelling allies (Lee, 2020).

Although the LDP’s firm grip on power made Japan more capable and willing to share the burden of upholding regional stability, the burden itself increased. Successive Japanese governments enhanced national security legislation to strengthen executive power at home, and to loosen restrictions on the use of military force abroad (Maslow, 2015). Prompted by demands to support the U.S.-led Global War on Terror, Japanese personnel would be deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, and, from 2011 onwards, to a newly established base at the Horn of Africa in Djibouti. Closer to home, in 2005 the United States and Japan explicitly extended their alliance’s domain of governance to include Taiwan (Medeiros, 2005). And while Japan had bought into the U.S. Western Pacific ballistic missile defense system in 1998 (Hughes, 2001)—the establishment of which many predicted would produce a security dilemma with China (Christensen, 1999; Medeiros, 2005)—Japan not only started patrolling East Asian seas but, from 2014 onwards, also extracted explicit commitments from successive U.S. administrations to come to its aid in defending the Senkaku rocks against China (Congressional Research Service, 2021). On the whole, the U.S.-Japan

alliance has become increasingly costly to maintain in that it prevented overcoming long-standing intraregional tensions over the war-time past and hence led to the perceived need for further militarization. Instead of enhancing security, the resulting order has come to rest on more insecure foundations.

### ***The costs of the Korean division***

The division of the Korean Peninsula resulted from an overlay of the decolonization process with the heating up of the Cold War. Although the 1953 armistice stopped large-scale violence, the conflict on the Korean Peninsula continues to this day. Thus, the social bargain trading U.S. support for the nationalist South Korean regime and its anti-communist struggle against the North in return for military basing rights persists in the form of the U.S.–South Korea alliance. To be sure, over the years Washington had directed considerable resources into negotiations for preventing North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. However, it was not only resistance from conservatives in North Korea, South Korea, and Japan that hampered progress with the 1994 Agreed Framework and the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009). Since U.S. decision-makers continued to consider North Korea a “rogue” state and part of the “Axis of Evil,” these diplomatic initiatives soon lost political support on all sides (Bleiker, 2005).

When South Korean President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and his successor Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) initiated the first sustained peace process around token economic cooperation and family reunions with the North, they met considerable resistance from conservative establishments on both sides of the Pacific (Bae & Moon, 2014; Kim, 2004). With these efforts at confidence-building undermined, the 2010 sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan near the fiercely disputed Northern Limit Line, presumably by North Korea, then threw Northeast Asia back into Cold War-like patterns of confrontation (Kang & Lee, 2010). As successful U.S. crisis management showed, Washington still held the keys for mitigating political polarization within South Korea and alleviating inner-Korean tensions. However, looking at the peninsula through the lens of the hub-and-spoke system, the United States prioritized the strengthening of deterrence over long-term investments into a peace process.

The inability of the United States and its allies to halt Pyongyang’s subsequently accelerating nuclear development, on the one hand, and the impeachment and imprisonment of conservative South Korean President Park Geun-hye in early 2017, on the other, revealed the failure of existing institutions to uphold the status quo. As the ensuing confrontation over the North’s nuclear and ballistic missile testing in 2017 showed, the costs for maintaining the post-war era bargain had increased further. Had the crisis led to preemptive South Korean and U.S. strikes and elicited a North Korean military

response (Cohen et al., 2018), the U.S.–South Korea alliance would have lost its very purpose of securing cold peace on the peninsula. Thus, to safeguard the post-war order, President Trump had no better choice than to cooperate with the new South Korean leadership’s progressive agenda of engaging the North. Acknowledging that the Korean War had not yet ended (Jackson, 2018), Trump contradicted the long-held view that South Korea and the United States were enjoying a unilateral peace threatened solely by the North’s incessant provocations (CNN, 2010). Once again, the centrality of the United States in facilitating negotiations between North and South, and its strict control over North–South confidence-building measures, demonstrated that creating a more peaceful regional order requires Washington’s tacit blessing, at the least. Since successive U.S. administrations have made meaningful rapprochement contingent on North Korea’s unilateral nuclear disarmament, the conflict continues and Pyongyang has been fielding more sophisticated missile technology, increasing the danger to the United States (Bandow, 2021). And while the return of wartime operational control over South Korean forces from the United States continues to be postponed, South Korean defense expenditures outpace economic growth (Kim, 2021).

### ***Rising China and the failure of the United States rebalance***

Originally on the other side of the East–West divide, China’s radical change of course toward a state-guided capitalist economy from the late 1970s onwards allowed the US to establish formal bilateral relations. In return for diplomatically recognizing the communist People’s Republic instead of the Republic of China on Taiwan, and granting it access to global markets, Beijing partnered with Washington in containing the Soviet threat. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party’s crack-down on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 questioned this social bargain. However, the continuing efforts of “reform and opening up” that culminated in China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 maintained the overall trajectory. The bargain started to crumble, however, when China’s rapid development was seen as seriously challenging the Japanese and US economies’ leading positions. In particular, the disruptions caused by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and later by the Covid-19 pandemic, had the paradoxical effect of emboldening increasingly insecure leaders on both sides of the Pacific (Ross, 2012; Yang, 2021). A series of controversies around maritime disputes unsettled bilateral ties between China, the United States, and Japan, to the point where the United States and Chinese leaderships felt the need for decisive action (Wirth, 2019).

The Obama Administration’s policy innovation, known as the Pivot to the Asia-Pacific announced in 2011, was perhaps the most serious U.S. initiative to rebuild the international order of the Asia-Pacific region (Clinton, 2011). The Pivot rested on three pillars: the strengthening of existing alliances, the

diversification of partners (importantly, to include India, Vietnam, and Indonesia), and greater involvement in regional multilateral institutions. Despite the Pivot's emphasis on engagement, some suggested that a truly multilateral security order had remained "undesirable" (Park, 2011). U.S. policymakers continued to see multilateral institutions as supplementary components in a "bilateralism plus" system (Gannon, 2018, p. 33). Hence, Obama's attempt to engage China while simultaneously preparing to counter or hedge against its rise, at the same as reassuring U.S. allies in their struggles with Beijing, only temporarily patched the cracks in the hub-and-spoke system. The net effect of the Pivot was to heighten anxieties on all sides. Whether intended or not, Beijing considered it as an attempt to slow down China's "peaceful development" and yet another step toward Cold-War-style containment that had to be countered with even more determination (Fu & Wu, 2016; Global Times, 2016). At the same time, Washington's allies, facing growing threats from China and North Korea, remained wary about the commitment of the internally increasingly polarized United States (Haezle & O'Neil, 2018). In short, policymakers on both sides of the Pacific struggled to imagine alternate futures. Advances in regional multilateralism had been providing them with opportunities to do so since the early 1990s.

### **The unfulfilled promise of Asia-Pacific regionalism**

Multilateralism has long informed the U.S. approach to global affairs. However, due to concerns that this way of renegotiating the Asia-Pacific social compact might diminish its weight, Washington provided only lukewarm support for initiatives promoting regional multilateralism, defined as cooperation for the realization of common political or economic aims among states in a given geographic area (Gamble & Payne, 1996, p. 2). This stance resulted in an "inclusion-exclusion dichotomy": The United States, "influential on regional stability through bilateral security arrangements, is normally viewed as an outsider in matters of East Asian regionalism" (Terada, 2011, p. 135). Whenever the United States was supportive of East Asian initiatives, however, Washington played a central role in advancing regional institutions and stabilizing expectations of peaceful change. In most cases, Washington's ambivalence exacerbated intra-Asian contests over the redistribution of rights and responsibilities and the designation of legitimate actors in regional politics. Consequently, as this section will demonstrate, Asia-Pacific regionalism has remained below its potential to function as a decisive order-building device.

### ***The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)***

In the early 1990s, Australian and Canadian officials launched initiatives for establishing a regional security dialogue following the model of the

Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) (Kerr et al., 1995). At the same time, Japan floated the so-called Nakayama proposal for a security forum with an expanded ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (ASEAN-PMC) membership. However, both attempts at institutionalizing a multilateral approach to cooperative or common security met with cool responses in the United States. According to Secretary of State James Baker, “we ought to be careful about changing those arrangements [the U.S.-centered alliances] and discarding them for something else unless we’re absolutely certain that the something else is better and will work” (as cited in Shenon, 1991, p. 14).

Concerned about the possibility of U.S. retrenchment from the region, Southeast Asian policy-makers followed the Australian and Japanese leads (Emmers, 2001). Backed by a critical mass of East Asian governments, regional multilateralism came to be seen as complementary to the existing hub-and-spoke system (Goh, 2004, p. 51; Midford, 2000, p. 387). When the ARF was eventually established as the Asia-Pacific’s first cooperative security framework in 1993, Secretary of State Warren Christopher “cautioned that the arrangement would ‘in no way supplant America’s alliances or forward military presence in Asia’” (as cited in Branigin, 1993). Accordingly, United States (as well as Chinese) participation remained passive, especially during the first years. Because the Clinton Administration, despite seeing “much room for other security arrangements,” “also believe [d] in hubs and spokes” (Sanger, 1993), “the possibility of the ARF making any substantial results” was forestalled (Jho & Chae, 2014, p. 243). As an experienced observer put it at the time, Washington, instead of offering the region “a comprehensive pattern of mutually beneficial cooperation for the future,” practiced a “shortsighted, zigzag, tit-for-tat diplomacy in the service of special interests” (Emmerson, 1995). Without naming specific countries, several years later, the Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister of Singapore alluded to the same problem of lukewarm support to existing institutional arrangements for cooperation:

A trend toward security cooperation is already established. [...] But more can be done. Multilateral processes, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, can be strengthened [...] Countries must be willing to discuss and identify the common challenges facing the region and explore ways of preempting problems. (Tan, 2000)

While the ARF’s potential as a “regional norms generator” remained untapped, it served Washington for garnering support for “international norms [free-trade and economic liberalization] deemed important for the US” (Goh, 2004, p. 59). Thus, two decades after its establishment, the ARF lost the limited importance it once had. Given the Obama Administration’s renewed interest in the Asia-Pacific from 2010 onwards, two other cooperative frameworks should have fared better.

### ***The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the East Asia Summit (EAS)***

Resembling “political declarations issued during state visits” more than an international treaty in the conventional sense (Crook, 2009, p. 741), the TAC established general principles of peaceful coexistence similar to those codified in the United Nations Charter. When it was opened for accession to non-ASEAN countries in 2003, China and India were the first to sign. However, Washington was not interested in adopting a treaty it had not written and that some thought could interfere with the practice of bilateral military exercises in the region (Crook, 2009, p. 742). When the idea of expanding the scope of cooperation through an East Asia Summit took shape in 2005, Washington adopted a similar “wait and see” attitude” (Cossa et al., 2005, p. vii). “Looking in from the cold” (Mydans, 2005), U.S. policy-makers played down the relevance of the forum by suggesting that it “isn’t a big deal” (Wonacott & King, 2005). Thought to establish a level playing field beyond the ASEAN Plus Three (APT; China, Japan, South Korea) framework, China, by contrast, saw the EAS as an opportunity to exercise regional leadership. This went against the interests of several ASEAN countries and of Japan, which pushed to include additional parties to dilute Beijing’s influence. Thus, ASEAN invited Australia, India, and New Zealand to join. To avoid being left out, Australia (also a United States ally) grudgingly signed “the damn thing [the TAC]” (Sheridan quoted in Pan, 2014, p. 459), while Washington seemed confident that its allies would bring its views into EAS debates (Park, 2011, p. 151).

Still, in 2009, the Obama Administration decided to sign the TAC to “symbolically boost the United States’ standing in Southeast Asia by expanding the multilateral component of U.S. policy in the region” (Manyin et al., 2009, p. 1). This commitment formalized Washington’s recognition of Southeast Asian leadership in the promotion of regional cooperation (Teh, 2011, p. 356). By 2010, moreover, the United States was no longer willing to assume the risk that the EAS “might make collective agreements on trade or even security affairs without U.S. input” (Vaughn, 2006, p. 1). In fact, the EAS had come to be seen as a potential threat to existing frameworks (Cook, 2008). In the context of Obama’s efforts to enhance U.S. presence in the region, Washington eventually acceded. This did not prevent Secretary of State Clinton (2010) from clearly putting alliances and partnerships before multilateral cooperation when speaking at the 2010 EAS summit.

Thus, the general focus on U.S.-centered ties, implicitly also by Washington’s rivals and adversaries, forestalled the formation of an effective regional framework. Instead, it created yet another large forum of the kind that Washington itself has long considered ineffective (Saruta, 2012, p. 89). And while Japan privileged the neutralized EAS, China—unhappy with

this outcome—refocused on the ASEAN Plus Three framework and began to play down the EAS' relevance (Teh, 2011).

Another notable initiative by regional actors for retaining their agency, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), has also faced difficulties escaping the intensifying Sino-US rivalry (Cai, 2016). Originally a platform for Southeast Asian defense officials, membership was extended to the Association's eight dialogue partners Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States in 2010. Due to its practical focus on cooperation and the manageable membership of 18 countries (vs. 27 in the ARF, for instance), the ADMM-Plus has widely been regarded as the "best [...] opportunity in the region's long quest for creating a functional security architecture" (Mukherjee, 2013). Yet, the United States, while actively supporting the framework's various activities, had embraced the ADMM-Plus also for scheduling bilateral meetings at the biannual summits. Thus, "military thinking" continued to "default to a bilateral mindset in security cooperation" (Leffler, 2016, p. 129).

Given East Asian elites' shared interest in promoting economic growth and their long-standing practice of separating economics from politics, economic regionalism should have provided a more promising base for the renegotiation of the Asia-Pacific social compact. However, the pattern of U.S. disinterest in leading regional multilateralism, combined with its ambivalence about regional initiatives—what Buzan (2012, p. 7) even called a "long-standing and very clever anti-regional diplomatic tactic"—also shaped developments in this issue area, as the following demonstrates.

### ***The Asia-Pacific Economic Co-Operation (APEC) forum***

Similar to the cases of multilateral security cooperation, it was Australian and Japanese initiatives that led to the establishment of the first regional multilateral framework for promoting economic development, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum, in 1989. APEC operated smoothly as long as it limited itself to celebrating summit meetings. However, it was unable to produce substantive results when most needed: during the 1997/1998 Asian Financial Crisis. In particular, the Clinton Administration's opposition to measures that went against the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) orthodoxy of deregulation and liberalization (Higgott, 1998) left the region with the impression that the established global economic institutions favored Washington's interests at the expense of public goods (Tay, 2005, p. 16). Consequently, Japan proposed an Asian Monetary Fund, an idea that had already been discussed in Tokyo for some time prior to the crisis (Amyx, 2002, p. 4). However, due to direct opposition from Washington and the IMF, as well as suspicions from Beijing, it was taken off the table even before a discussion could start (Yuzawa, 2018, p. 467). Thus, the gap

between what the existing U.S.-centric hub-and-spoke system provided and what the region needed continued to widen.

### **Free trade and connectivity infrastructure**

As China's economic power expanded, the Obama and Abe Administrations became increasingly concerned that Beijing would step in to "mak[e] the rules" (Abe, 2013; Seib, 2015). To counter its potential influence through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement among the ASEAN members and China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand, they started to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free-trade agreement. However, U.S.-centric bilateralism based on the hub-and-spoke structure reasserted itself when the incoming Trump Administration quickly abandoned the TPP. Left in the cold, Japan brought Australia on board to save a scaled-down version, called the Comprehensive and Progressive TPP (CPTPP). China, which had initially been excluded through the application of the TPP's "higher standards," now began to show interest in joining (Zhou & Wu, 2018). At the same time, Beijing's promotion of the alternate RCEP seemed to pay out when the prospective members, minus India, signed the trade pact in November 2020 (ASEAN, 2020). However, while the Biden Administration continued to shun free-trade agreements, in 2021 China filed its formal application for the CPTPP (Zhou & Gao, 2021). Rather than expanding China's control over the region, however, these moves prompted other actors to step up their efforts at order-building in and beyond the Asia-Pacific.

A similar pattern can be observed when it comes to the financing of infrastructure such as roads, rails, airports, and ports. In 2013, China, unhappy with being denied greater say in the U.S.-dominated World Bank and the Japan-controlled Asian Development Bank (ADB), established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB would become one formal institution for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative for connecting China across Eurasia, mainly with Africa and Europe. Reminiscent of past patterns, the United States firmly opposed it. While experts at the World Bank and other international financial institutions welcomed the AIIB for addressing the shortfall of investment into connectivity infrastructure, for the US the "heart of the debate [... had] less to do with the development agenda and more to do with global leadership in multilateral institutions" (Olson, 2015). The Obama Administration expressed "concerns over a ... trend toward constant accommodation of China, which is not the best way to engage a rising power" (Kaya et al., 2021) and lobbied governments worldwide against joining. Only once it became clear that the AIIB's successful start—including through the participation of major U.S. allies like Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom—was inevitable did Washington shift its rhetoric and propose that the AIIB closely cooperate



with the existing institutions (Brunnstrom, 2015). At the same time, the Trump and later the Biden Administration started to field competing programs in collaboration with the G7 and “other like-minded partners,” such as the Build Back Better World (B3W) infrastructure initiative (White House, 2021).

Taken together, particularly frameworks for economic cooperation reveal an early trend toward the geographical expansion of the domain of governance beyond East Asia and the Pacific. This points to the renegotiation of the regional order beyond the hub-and-spoke system’s original bargains. The trend accelerated when India came to play a bigger role in strategic calculations, including in the realm of security politics.

### **Towards Indo-Pacific multilateralism**

The clear limits that existing frameworks showed in alleviating the Asia-Pacific problem of order spurred policymakers to expand the domain of governance to the “Indo-Pacific.” To be sure, successive U.S. administrations had sought to improve strategic ties with India, the world’s most populous procedural democracy and promising counterweight to China, for about two decades. Yet, the Indo-Pacific idea emerged from Asia. Reminiscent of the initiatives for regional cooperation, Australian and Japanese leaders, and strategists from India (Khurana, 2017), were the first to frame their reaching out for alleviating their foreign and security political predicaments under this heading.

Having strengthened military ties with the United States throughout the post-Cold-War period, their economic dependence on China had been deepening simultaneously. Thus, heightening Sino-American tensions threw Canberra’s and Tokyo’s tenuous political relations with Beijing into stark relief, rendering the Cold War era compacts unworkable. As such, the enlargement of the domain of governance from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific has not solely been a response to the Chinese attempt of increasing its leverage through the Belt and Road Initiative and related institutions such as the AIIB. The various Indo-Pacific strategies responded to the accentuation of a problem that Asia-Pacific multilateralism had tried to address since the early 1990s: keeping the United States engaged in and preventing China from dominating the region while avoiding conflict between the two.

In an effort to safeguard his country’s leading status in Asia amid continuing economic doldrums, in 2006 the Japanese political heavyweight Aso Taro started to promote the idea of an Arc of Freedom and Prosperity as part of his “value-oriented diplomacy” strategy (Aso, 2006). Highlighting Japan’s democratic credentials, he differentiated it from authoritarian China as well as from less “mature” Asian democracies (Aso, 2005). Prime Minister Abe Shinzo reinforced this diplomatic course when he suggested

that the leaders of “India, Japan and other like-minded countries in the Asia-Pacific region” regularize dialogue on “themes of mutual interest” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2006) and later used the imagery of the “confluence” of the Pacific and Indian Oceans to strengthen Japan’s connection to India (Abe, 2007). In 2012, at the beginning of his second stint as prime minister, Abe followed up and replaced the confluence metaphor, which was not very popular, with the idea of a Democratic Security Diamond linking Japan with the United States, India, and Australia (Abe, 2012). Importantly, this move came at a time when Washington’s concerns about frequent changes in Japan’s domestic political landscape led powerful exponents of the alliance community to call on “drifting” Japan to militarily step up or face relegation to “second-tier” status (Armitage & Nye, 2012). By 2016, what became labelled as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision morphed into the core concept of the Japanese foreign- and security political strategies. And after border clashes with China made India’s hesitancy disappear, the four members of the Democratic Security Diamond started to meet regularly for the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad) on security affairs (Madan, 2017). Thus, the Indo-Pacific has proven useful for containing Chinese influence through the mobilization of “like-minded” partners and the strengthening of United States’ commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance (Ishibashi, 2018; Watanabe, 2019). At the same time, it solidified Japan’s status as a leading defender of the “rules-based order,” also during the volatile Trump presidency.

The Australian origins of the Indo-Pacific concept can be traced back to about 2011 and are therefore more recent (Scott, 2013). Unlike in Japan, where a group of politicians from the right of the political spectrum strategically promoted the Indo-Pacific, primarily with their country’s status relative to rising China in mind, in Australia the concept emerged with various emphases and motivations. It benefitted from the realization of Australia’s bordering of the Indian Ocean and developed based on the general view that the world affairs’ “center of gravity” was moving (from the Euro-Atlantic) toward the Indo-Pacific region, which “includes our top nine trading partners,” “embraces our key strategy ally, the US, as well as our largest trading partner, China,” and “reinforces India’s role as strategic partner for Australia” (Varghese, 2012). Accordingly, the term also made its first appearance in the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, which sought to re-envision Australia’s place in the region (Australia, 2012). Nonetheless, strategic considerations reflecting the basic questions of whether and how Australia was part of Asia were crucial. The 2009 *Defence White Paper*, which paved the way for the inclusion of the Indian Ocean region into strategic calculations, notably through its emphasis on sea lane security, also entailed one of the most outspoken statements on relations with the United States. Under the impression of failing military campaigns in the

Middle East and Afghanistan, and continuously rising China, the white paper raised doubts about the very basis of Australian foreign and security policy when asking: “Will the United States continue to play over the very long-term the strategic role that it has undertaken since the end of World War II?” (Department of Defence of Australia, 2009, p. 44; Wirth, 2019). Rory Medcalf, one of the principal promoters of the Indo-Pacific perspective, provided the reassuring answer to this cardinal question: The expanded region is “too large for one [China], or perhaps even two, powers to dominate” (Medcalf, 2018). At the same time, Australia can more comfortably be located in the Indo-Pacific region than in Asia, as the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* had somewhat controversially attempted to do (Mascitelli & O’Mahony, 2014).

Does the emerging Indo-Pacific regionalism provide a path toward building a more stable, peaceful order? On the surface, the Trump Administration’s 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report suggested that the adoption of the Indo-Pacific lens signified a return toward hegemonic leadership (Department of Defense, 2019). However, the United States’ retreat from the TPP free-trade agreement, low-profile presence at major regional summits during the Trump Administration, trade conflicts, even with allies, and the persistent demands for South Korea and Japan to financially contribute more for stationing U.S. troops there (also under President Biden), point to a United States that is unwilling and unable to play the role of a strong leader in the enlarged, Indo-Pacific domain of governance (Tan, 2020). Against this background, the common understanding of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic space to be managed by a coalition of like-minded democracies, such as represented in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, must be interpreted as an effort at mitigating the effects of the failing hub-and-spoke system (Beeson & Lee-Brown, 2017; Department of State, 2019; Rajagopalan, 2020; Tow, 2019). The establishment of the Quad, as it is known—to date, arguably the most tangible expression of the Indo-Pacific approach—followed a balance-of-power logic rather than one that aims to solve collective action problems, but its institutionalization is nevertheless changing the social bargains sustaining the current order. In the enlarged, Indo-Pacific domain of governance, Asian “democracies” are placed on the same level as “Western” ones, and they are asked to assume an increasingly greater role in securing peace in the region. Just how peaceful a future order will be remains to be seen, but the path to overcoming the U.S.-centered hub-and-spoke bilateralism appears to be set.

An alternative interpretation of the materialization of Indo-Pacific multilateralism is that the attempt to integrate the East Asian and Indian Ocean regions into the “liquid continuum” (Doyle & Rumley, 2019, p. 83) of U.S.-policed global commons signifies the end of regional cooperation and

deepening polarization leading to some kind of Cold War-like confrontation between two blocs. However, this view is too narrow; it ignores that regional realities and policy preferences have changed significantly since the 1950s, when the social compact that underlies the Asia-Pacific order was forged. Unlike in Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the United States, where hub-and-spoke bilateralism continues to determine foreign and security policies, political institutions in most Southeast Asian and South Asian states' foreign relations have not been or are no longer conditioned by the imperative of anti-communism. Furthermore, unlike in China and North Korea, where the "struggle" against the "West" continues to frame policies, those Southeast Asian regimes that were, conversely, relying on anti-capitalist ideologies for their legitimation, have abandoned the imperative to resist the "West." Thus, the farther the focus moves away from the geopolitically divided Northeast Asia, the more the East–West and democratic vs. authoritarian divisions give way to multiple and overlapping differentiations between the developed vs. developing states, post-colonial countries vs. great powers, as well as ethnic and religious divides. While this diversity complicates the formation of common views about how to cooperate in which issue areas, pragmatism has generally held sway among the many states that have been newly incorporated into the Indo-Pacific region. That is, after an initial focus on the confrontation between China and the Quad members, the enlargement of the domain of governance invariably also entails an expansion of the range of legitimate actors.

Acutely aware that enlisting on either side in the Sino-Allied struggle can, at best, yield short-term benefits while increasing political and economic risks, governments of less powerful states in the Indo-Pacific meta-region have been searching for a middle-ground commensurate to their respective circumstances. In Indonesia and Malaysia, foreign policy advisors had become worried about strategic rivalry and "the unfolding situation" as "a classic illustration of the security dilemma" already during Obama's and Xi's first terms (Kuik et al., 2012, p. 338). By 2019, these concerns moved to the top of the region's foreign and security policy agendas. At the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue, the Singaporean Prime Minister, for instance, demanded that the United States and China halt their sliding toward confrontation and abstain from attempts at dividing Southeast Asia into spheres of influence (Lee, 2019). Hence, the leader of the long-standing Western ally called for advancing regional cooperation to stabilize East Asia. Moreover, to preserve Southeast Asia's autonomy to engage with both China and the United States, ASEAN presented its own inclusive conception of the Indo-Pacific, an area the Association had envisioned earlier already to dilute confrontational policies in its neighborhood (ASEAN, 2013, pt. 10). The *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* reflects the main elements of a policy strategy adopted by Indonesia, which, like Singapore,

was explicit in emphasizing that the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept was not to be used as a Cold-War style "containment strategy" (Scott, 2019). In a bid to take back ownership over the definition of the region, the ASEAN Outlook underlines the argument that the hub-and-spoke system as the liberal international order's Asia-Pacific manifestation no longer responds to regional realities (Anwar, 2020; ASEAN, 2019).

In addition, other actors from the region and beyond started to devise Indo-Pacific strategies and thus to partake in the redrawing of our mental maps. Apart from Japan and Australia, the idea took root early on among strategists in India (Khurana, 2007) too, before entering policy documents in the United States, and, via France, eventually reaching Europe (European Union, 2021; France, 2021; Germany, 2020). These may have been triggered by China's ambitions, and been implemented with China in mind, but they bring various perspectives and emphases to the tables of Asia policymaking. For France, Australia, and India, for example, the Indo-Pacific offers "an adequate framework" for their Trilateral Dialogue, not only as a defensive measure against China and China-U.S. rivalry, but also to enhance their say in other policy areas by building a coalition of middle powers despite divergent views on the Indo-Pacific concept (Grare, 2020, p. 156). This plurality of perspectives does not automatically lead to cooperation, but it does provide a way for cooperative practices beyond the set parameters that have long defined the hub-and-spoke system. The case of Japan's Indo-Pacific policy document is illustrative in this regard. Reportedly at the urging of Singapore's leaders, Tokyo changed the title from "strategy" to the less military-sounding term "vision", indicating a less confrontational stance (Jiji Press, 2018). Therefore, the new Indo-Pacific political reality changes the way actors "plan and act, even the way they come to understand cooperation and conflict, and the precise nature of threats" (Mações, 2020). The continuing proliferation of multiple and partially competing frameworks testify to this dynamic. The Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security partnership, announced in September 2021, and the Quadrilateral Dialogue's taking up of various non-traditional security issues while reaching out to new partners (Le Thu & Teo, 2021), are but the latest examples.

## Conclusions

In the Asia-Pacific region, the principal institutions of the Cold War-informed order have endured because "none of the San Francisco [hub-and-spoke] System participant states have found other regional and bilateral relationships sufficiently attractive to eschew the benefits of this older security framework" (Beazley, 2003, p. 325). However, the social compact underlying this order has been subject to changing conditions. This fact may have

become lost amid the conflation of the liberal international order with the U.S.-centered hub-and-spoke system, and of U.S. primacy such as it had existed until the early 1950s, with the U.S. hegemony in the decades thereafter (Clark, 2011). This conflation complicates the renegotiation of the various social bargains, as they could renew U.S. hegemony, or at least stop major actors preparing for large-scale conflict. However, tracing the fate of regional projects of the 1990s and 2000s, and connecting these initiatives to recent developments around the idea of the Indo-Pacific suggests that a greater transformation is underway beyond the diplomatic and political maneuvering that responds to immediate security concerns.

To be sure, until the Trump presidency, it appeared that limited modifications in the distribution of international rights and responsibilities and in the delineation of governance domains allowed for the strengthening of the U.S.-led order. However, the institutions underpinning this order have been struggling to achieve their purpose of providing security, stability, and prosperity in the changing regional context. Against this background, the U.S.'s reluctance to lead regional order-building through multilateral channels, while at the same time displaying ambivalence toward East Asian initiatives to this end, created a void that competing major powers have been trying to fill. Thus, the geographical expansion of the domain of governance has become part of the re-negotiation of regional order. The search by East Asian states, including Japan and Australia, for stability and prosperity gave rise to the proliferation of regional multilateralism. Starting in the 1990s, ASEAN-based forums and the enlarged frameworks pushed for by Australia and Japan expanded from Southeast and East Asia to create an Asia-Pacific domain. As these initiatives fell short of assuring a new, post-Cold War order, additional frameworks started to spread across what has recently become known as the Indo-Pacific from around 2005 on.

The inclusion of Australia, New Zealand, and especially India in formerly East Asian regional projects shows that multilateralism had taken on an Indo-Pacific dimension before it was even known as such. More importantly, regional projects as inclusive visions of the Indo-Pacific grew into a space that had long been an exclusively U.S. strategic construct. While the U.S. Pacific Command, first renamed Indo-Asia-Pacific and then labelled Indo-Pacific Command, may have gained in importance, the United States is no longer alone in determining the domain of governance and its meaning. At the same time, the enlargement of the imagined region dilutes Chinese influence, thus making initiatives for Indo-Pacific multilateral cooperation less dependent on Washington's elusive hegemonic leadership and less affected by Asian conservatives' mistrust of their neighbors.

These findings lead to the conclusion that decision-makers in Washington and allied capitals have the choice to either lead the enlarged region's institutionalization and nudge the Chinese government to cooperate, or to spar

with Beijing over the precise location of a new containment line and lose their remaining influence over China and its peripheries. Chinese leaders have the converse options at their disposal. If they adapt to new realities, they can continue engaging the region and secure their place in it. Otherwise, they are likely to face deepening isolation and retreat to their shrinking sphere of influence. As Acharya (2014) pointed out, the ensuing order will remain a mixture of conflict and cooperation. Our analysis confirmed this by showing that many bargains struck in the decades after World War II have yet to be renegotiated or set up entirely anew. No overarching social compact is in sight, and no grand unifying design is likely to emerge any time soon. Thinking in Indo-Pacific dimensions can help decision-makers deal with this uncertainty and remove much of the insecurity caused by narrow views on linearly shifting power across the Pacific.

## Note

1. For a similar assessment of the international societies' institutional structures that make it unlikely for China to become a superpower, see Buzan (2018).

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for excellent research assistance by Juan Merino and Juan Ignacio Ferrari. We further thank our colleagues at the GIGA and PUC Chile, respectively, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts, and the two reviewers and the editor for their constructive feedback.

## Disclosure statement

Nicole Jenne started as an associate editor of *Contemporary Security Policy* in January 2022. This article predates her appointment. It was submitted in July 2021 and the first decision after peer-review was made in September 2021, well before Jenne applied for the position of associate editor. The final decision after a second round of peer-review was taken on 4 January 2022 with the editor-in-chief providing several minor recommendations to finalize the manuscript.

## Funding

This work was supported by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [Grant Number 44989997].

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