

Dr. **Baha' Aldeen Raed Suliman Almomani**  
Institute for National and International Security (INIS)  
Email: [almomanibaha5@gmail.com](mailto:almomanibaha5@gmail.com)

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## STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY AND NORMATIVE CONTESTATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: RETHINKING SECURITY BEYOND ALLIANCE-CENTERED MODELS

**Abstract:** *This study examines how military-centered frameworks alone cannot fully capture the security of the Indo-Pacific; as a result, perception, strategic narratives, and ethical considerations are incorporated as the primary factors that determine regional order. The study examines how global power rivalry creates strategic and interpretive security dilemmas, particularly for Southeast Asian and East Asian states seeking to balance deterrence, alignment, and strategic autonomy, through the lens of the Indo-Pacific as a contested security area. To critically examine contemporary regional security practices and scholarship, the study, grounded in qualitative and theory-driven methods, integrates perspectives from defensive realism, ontological security theory, and norm localization. The study's findings indicate that instability in the Indo-Pacific is sustained not only by material military competition but also by strategic ambiguity, hybrid forms of rivalry, and localized interpretations of threat and legitimacy. The middle powers play a critical role through strategies that combine autonomy, cooperation, and deterrence. Furthermore, it is suggested that the region's natural development occurs gradually through local adaptation processes as opposed to the implementation of uniform or externally imposed standards, which explains the longevity of adaptable and consensus-oriented institutional arrangements. The study concludes that institutional innovation, communication, and ethical restraint should be used in conjunction with traditional deterrence techniques to maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific. This is because ignoring the material or ideational aspects of security will prolong the long-term instability problem in one of the world's most strategically important areas.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-Pacific security; security dilemmas; strategic narratives; middle powers; ontological security; norm localization; strategic autonomy*

## Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, the Indo-Pacific has assumed unprecedented strategic significance as global power competition intensifies. Increasingly framed as the geopolitical center of gravity, the region reflects a convergence of military rivalry, economic interdependence, and normative contestation. Southeast Asia and East Asia occupy a particularly sensitive position within this landscape, functioning not merely as arenas of competition but as active agents negotiating their own security futures. Conventional security approaches have tended to privilege military balances and alliance structures; however, such frameworks risk overlooking the interpretive and ethical dimensions through which insecurity is experienced, constructed, and managed at the regional level. This study argues that Indo-Pacific security cannot be understood solely in terms of material power transitions or structural rivalry. Rather, the region is shaped by the interaction of traditional and non-traditional threats, evolving alliance architectures, and contested visions of legitimacy. Great-power competition—most visibly between the United States and China—extends beyond conventional military posturing to encompass maritime governance, trade corridors, institutional influence, and normative authority (Khan, 2025). Consequently, the Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographical designation but a strategic space where global power shifts intersect with regional agency and adaptive security behavior. While earlier scholarship predicted that Asia's rising security dilemmas would inevitably destabilize the region, reality has been more nuanced. Large-scale interstate war has been avoided, yet insecurity persists through intensified rivalry, strategic mistrust, and flexible mini-lateral cooperation frameworks (Friedberg, 2012). These developments highlight the insufficiency of purely structural or materialist explanations, suggesting that insecurity in the Indo-Pacific is best understood as a sustained condition of strategic uncertainty shaped by both material and interpretive factors.

A central contribution of this study lies in its integration of defensive realism with ontological security theory to explain how regional actors navigate insecurity not only through deterrence and alliance-building, but also through identity-driven threat perception, normative alignment, and psychological reassurance. Examining Australia's strategic

posture—particularly its engagement with AUKUS, the South China Sea, and Taiwan—this study demonstrates how security dilemmas are reinforced when material anxieties intersect with concerns over identity, alliance credibility, and perceived normative stability (Korolev, 2023; Li, 2025). This study addresses the following questions: How do regional actors in the Indo-Pacific navigate insecurity amid overlapping US–China rivalry, shifting alliance structures, and non-traditional threats? In what ways do identity, normative frameworks, and strategic ambiguity shape their security behavior beyond material power considerations? By foregrounding the localization of norms, strategic hedging, and the interplay between material and ontological concerns, this study provides a novel analytical lens that moves beyond conventional structural analyses, highlighting the agency of regional actors in shaping their own security outcomes (Acharya, 2001; Waqar et al., 2025). The remainder of the study proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on Indo-Pacific security, highlighting gaps in traditional realist and institutionalist approaches. This is followed by a theoretical framework combining defensive realism with ontological security theory to explain regional strategic behavior. The subsequent section presents case analyses of key regional actors, including Australia, Japan, India, and ASEAN, illustrating how their strategies reflect both material calculations and normative considerations. The study concludes with a discussion of the broader implications for security science and policy, emphasizing how multidimensional frameworks can better account for persistent regional instability and strategic adaptation.

### Statement of Problem

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central arena of twenty-first-century global power competition, with the United States–China rivalry shaping the strategic, economic, and normative landscape. Research on the region has primarily focused on military capabilities, deterrence strategies, and alliance structures, with a particular emphasis on flashpoints such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, and nuclear proliferation (Chaudhry et al., 2025; Saeed et al., 2025). Regional actors, including Australia, Japan, India, and ASEAN, are often analyzed primarily in terms of their interactions with these great powers, rather than as independent strategic agents. Moreover, the region faces non-traditional security challenges, including cyberattacks, competition over digital infrastructure and semiconductors, climate change, and transnational terrorism, which compound existing structural tensions (Ferguson, 2024; Rafique, 2025).

Despite extensive scholarship, several critical gaps remain. Existing studies often examine great-power competition, alliance dynamics, and non-traditional threats separately, thereby obscuring how these factors intersect to shape regional security behavior (Khan, 2025; Waqar & Liaqat, 2025). Research has also largely overlooked the role of perception, identity, normative frameworks, and moral reasoning in shaping the strategies of smaller and intermediate powers. Prevailing theories of norm diffusion frequently depict local actors as passive recipients of global moral imperatives, leaving the dynamic processes of norm localization, selective adoption, and reinterpretation under-theorized, especially in non-Western contexts (Acharya, 2001; Cortell & Davis, 2000). Similarly, defensive realism explains how states in anarchic systems inadvertently provoke one another. Yet, it cannot fully account for strategic transitions such as Australia's shift from hedging to overt balancing against China, which are driven by identity anxieties and normative allegiance to a Western-led, rules-based order (Li, 2025; Wolpe, 2023). Finally, economic interdependence, while often cited as a stabilizing factor, fails to resolve enduring security dilemmas arising from unresolved sovereignty disputes, rapid military modernization, and alliance uncertainty (Raska, 2019).

This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding the agency of regional actors and examining how middle powers navigate overlapping pressures from great-power rivalry, alliance structures, and non-traditional threats while striving to maintain strategic autonomy. By integrating defensive realism with ontological security theory, the study demonstrates that material capabilities do not solely determine security behavior in the Indo-Pacific but are also shaped by identity, normative frameworks, and threat perception. Through empirical analysis of Australia, Japan, India, and ASEAN, the study provides a novel conceptual lens for understanding persistent strategic uncertainty and the role of interpretive and ethical reasoning in shaping security behavior. This approach moves beyond purely structural analyses, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how regional actors manage risk, balance dependencies, and contribute to the durability of regional peace and the shaping of Indo-Pacific order.

### **Significance of the Study**

In three central respects, this study advances the development of security science. First, it offers an original conceptual synthesis by integrating power competition with discursive analysis and ethical reflection. Rather than treating security rivalry as exclusively

material or strategic, this study argues that Indo-Pacific insecurity is also constituted through narratives of legitimacy, moral positioning, and interpretive struggles over authority. This integrated framework provides a more comprehensive analytical vocabulary for understanding how security dilemmas are produced not only through capabilities but also through contested meanings and normative claims. Second, this study moves beyond approaches that implicitly portray regional actors as passive adherents of great-power strategies. By foregrounding Southeast Asian and East Asian agency, it demonstrates that regional states actively shape the Indo-Pacific order through adaptive strategies of hedging, mini-lateral cooperation, and selective alignment. In doing so, the manuscript contributes a corrective analytical lens that re-centers regional actors as strategic agents rather than structural bystanders within the broader US–China rivalry.

Third, the study offers scholars and policymakers a conceptual framework for interpreting the interrelationship between stability and insecurity. Specifically, it provides an analytical framework for mapping how power distribution, perceptions, uncertainty, and adaptive strategies interact to shape regional outcomes. This contribution is significant because it equips security science with a more nuanced account of how order is maintained and contested under conditions of overlapping power transitions.

More broadly, this study enhances the international security literature by applying a joint analytical framework encompassing military rivalry, economic diplomacy, and hybrid threats, thereby generating deeper insight into the Indo-Pacific security environment (Chauhdry et al., 2025). Crucially, however, the manuscript's distinctive contribution lies in shifting the analytical emphasis away from structural rivalry alone and toward the perceptual and strategic uncertainties through which regional actors interpret and respond to insecurity. This move enlarges the scope of Indo-Pacific debates by conceptualizing state behavior through overlapping concerns with hedging, mini-lateralism, and strategic autonomy (Khan, 2025; Waqar & Liaqat, 2025). The implications of this approach extend beyond description, as the study offers an explanatory account of the factors that determine regional stability—namely, power distribution, uncertainty, perception, and adaptive strategy (Saeed et al., 2025).

Power shifts, alliance structures, and institutional reactions interact in highly complex ways, yet this study provides a clearer analytical mapping of these dynamics in the Indo-Pacific context. The growing rivalry between the United States and China has altered

the regional standing order, implicating major actors such as Japan, India, ASEAN, and Australia. Rather than reproducing conventional great-power-centered narratives, this manuscript argues that these relationships must be reconsidered through broader discussions of security communities, regionalism, and contested legitimacy. The resulting insights are valuable not only for academic theory-building but also for military and policy planners seeking to anticipate the future trajectory of peace and conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

Importantly, this study shifts the analytical viewpoint from norm entrepreneurs to norm takers, thereby questioning assumptions of Western moral authority while recognizing the capacity of non-Western actors to shape normative outcomes (Ignatieff, 1998). By integrating identity, culture, and institutional legitimacy, the localization concept contributes to a more context-sensitive theory of normative change in international relations (Acharya, 1997a, 2001). It also provides a framework for explaining variation in norm acceptance across regions and issue areas (Appadurai, 1996).

To deepen understanding of Indo-Pacific disagreements—such as those evident in Australia–China tensions—this study draws on the intersection of defensive realism and ontological security theory. The manuscript's analytical contribution lies in extending the security inquiry beyond material power alone by emphasizing perception, identity, and reliance on alliances as constitutive dimensions of middle-power insecurity. In doing so, it adds explanatory depth on how states operate in the presence of proximity to great-power conflict. Moreover, it offers policymakers insight into institutional arrangements that may reduce escalation and strategic miscalculation in the region (Li, 2025).

Understanding Indo-Pacific security dynamics is essential because regional stability directly shapes international norms, global economic systems, and the trajectory of future conflict (Lee & Pempel, 2012). As the United States recalibrates its presence and China's rise continues to transform the balance of power, the region has become a site of strategic competition through asymmetric denial, strategic ambiguity, and cyber-enabled operations (Raska, 2019; Cheung, 2014). This study contributes by demonstrating how such competitive practices are embedded within broader struggles over legitimacy and strategic interpretation, rather than being reducible to military calculations alone.

Accordingly, this study argues that the global power struggle reshapes Indo-Pacific security perceptions by constructing the region as a contested security domain in which authority derives from narrative and legitimacy as much as from tangible capability. It

explicitly rejects a Western-centric framing that reduces the Indo-Pacific to a battlefield dominated by the United States and China. Instead, it conceptualizes regional actors and intermediate powers as possessing strategic agency that decisively influences security outcomes (Waqar et al., 2025; Panda, 2024). This perspective advances the field by addressing how competing narratives and legitimacy claims sustain insecurity even in the absence of direct military confrontation.

The study further examines how East Asian and Southeast Asian actors confront moral dilemmas between alignment, deterrence, and strategic autonomy. Rather than treating alignment as a binary outcome, it conceptualizes a spectrum of uncertainty-management strategies, including minimal alignment, mini-lateral cooperation, and selective participation (Smith, 2025). These strategies underscore the interpretive and normative dimensions of security decision-making, demonstrating that ethical reasoning and shared perceptions are central to sustaining regional order.

By combining material analysis with normative and interpretive reasoning, this manuscript contributes an analytical framework capable of capturing the interaction between deterrence practices, legitimacy narratives, and ethical reflection. This approach is particularly crucial given the emergence of competitive domains such as cyber governance and technological rivalry, which intensify strategic mistrust and compress national security boundaries (Ferguson, 2024; Rafique, 2025; Rolland, 2024). Ultimately, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of Indo-Pacific insecurity by illustrating how classical and non-classical challenges converge during overlapping power transitions.

## Literature Review

The studies on Indo-Pacific strategy prioritize the U.S.-China rivalry, alliance politics, and maritime security; nevertheless, recent research underscores a gradual transition towards flexible mini-lateral arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS, which indicate a shift in adaptation to a complex security environment (Chaudhry et al., 2025). New research also indicates that non-traditional security threats are becoming increasingly significant, challenging defense-oriented approaches. Recent studies have highlighted the Indo-Pacific as a major battleground for Sino-US rivalries, with enormous consequences for regional security. Saeed et al. (2025) note that the situation regarding Taiwan, nuclear proliferation, and maritime disputes is the main flashpoint, creating insecurity and increasing the risk of escalation. Khan (2025) views the area as a security dilemma and

suggests that smaller states, in particular, are employing hedging, coalition-building, and multilateral frameworks to navigate the competing pressures. In the same way, Waqar and Liaqat (2025) name mini-lateral partnerships, technological cooperation, and flexible alignments as strategic tools for maintaining autonomy over one's strategic position. In the literature, however, these contributions have been taken to imply that regional responses were mainly reactive adaptations rather than dynamic processes influenced by gradual changes in threat perceptions. There is still a clear lack of research on how uncertainty, arising from shifting great power strategies, affects long-term regional decision-making and security (Khan, 2025; Waqar & Liaqat, 2025). The present study fills this gap by placing perception and uncertainty right at the center of its analytical variables. Karmazin et al. (2025) state that the Indo-Pacific region is being shaped by an intensifying geopolitical rivalry, particularly between the US and China, which creates strategic uncertainty and further complicates regional security. This struggle has manifested as the US–China rivalry at the center of regional security discourse, playing out across diplomatic, economic, and military arenas. Blair and Hanley Jr. (2001) consider a new round of security checks in the Asia-Pacific region in light of changing power dynamics and emphasize the importance of an alliance network as the primary driver of this change. Furthermore, Davidson (2014) points out the US strategic rebalancing efforts in the Asia Pacific region as one of the factors leading to China's strengthening of its position through the pivotal reference to Asia.

The regionalism experts highlight both the strengths and the weaknesses of ASEAN as a soft security broker. According to Acharya (2001), ASEAN's institutional frameworks are seeking to build a security community, but these efforts are hindered by competition among the great powers. Beeson and Lee-Brown (2021) note that regional integration in the Indo-Pacific has grown through geopolitical incentives but remains opposed. Callahan (2016) and Collins (2007) investigate in greater depth the impacts of China's economic schemes and ASEAN's institutional norms on regional order and indicate that both cooperative and competitive structures coexist. These cooperative and competitive structures are consistent with Constructivist theories, which maintain that norms shape state behavior by influencing their interests, identities, and perceptions of legitimacy (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Nonetheless, these narratives often portray a global consensus as the sole driver of a linear diffusion of norms, thereby minimizing the impact of local resistance and reinterpretation (Cortell & Davis, 2000). The anthropological approach to cultural globalization reveals that people do not simply adopt ideas but rather indigenize and transform them (Appadurai, 1996). Drawing on Southeast Asian regional studies, Acharya (1991, 1997a, 2001) views localization as a process in which local actors actively reconstruct foreign norms to make them compatible with prevailing normative frameworks. Although defensive realism assumes that nations prioritize security over power, defensive moves may still lead to mistrust and spirals of escalation (Zhang, 2021). Given growing concerns about China's aggression in the region, scholars view this shift from hedging to balancing in Australia-China relations as gradual (Korolev, 2023; Kwon, 2020). According to the aforementioned sources, Australia's strategic posture has changed as a result of growing alliance closeness, particularly with the US. However, recent studies highlight the limitations of structural explanations alone. According to Li (2025), ontological insecurity—the fear of losing one's identity in a shifting regional order—is the cause of Australia's strategic unease. Similarly, Wolpe (2023) explains that the West considers domestic political shifts and countries' alignment with Western liberal values when dealing with China. This study's corpus suggests that identity-based concerns and perceptions of material dangers, rather than power balances alone, sustain the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

According to Lee and Pempel (2012), the Indo-Pacific security complex is a dynamic system influenced by a range of variables, including historical events, alliance agreements, and power shifts. Pempel (2012) adds that the security environment in Northeast Asia reflects unresolved past conflicts, resulting in a fragmented and adaptable world order. In the same vein, Raska (2019) contributes to this hypothesis by pointing out that these structural vulnerabilities are fundamentally not being overcome because of the increasingly severe great-power competition. The most significant element influencing Indo-Pacific security is China's economic, political, and military rise (Zhu, 2009; Raska, 2019). China's economy has grown significantly over the years, offering it additional strategic options, but there remains significant uncertainty about its future goals and the trajectory of its political development (Zhu, 2009). In this regard, Zhu (2009) notes that one of China's greatest challenges will be to manage its ascent so that it can have a greater impact on the world without causing instability in the region. China's attempts to assert its

sovereignty while also seeking to participate in international trade exhibit the same issue (Raska, 2019). China's increasing military might, particularly in its air, navy, cyber, and missile capabilities, has altered the strategic balance and narrowed the quality gap with its neighbors (Erickson, 2012; Cordesman et al., 2013). Additionally, these factors contributed significantly to Southeast Asia's overall military modernization, which was characterized by higher defense spending and arms purchases (Bitzinger, 2010). According to Cheung (2014), these changes are a part of a larger picture of military innovation in which organizational adaptation and technical spread are the primary forces behind strategy change. The Indo-Pacific region is characterized by deep economic interconnectedness, yet this integration does not eliminate the strategic mistrust (Pempel, 2012; Raska, 2019). Similarly, military preparedness, alliance support, and hedging strategies are competing with economic bonds. According to Raska (2019), economic interconnectedness creates conditions for long-term competition over tactics and preferences rather than resolving security issues.

The region's transformation into a battlefield of conflicting narratives and strategic goals is depicted in academic works on Indo-Pacific geopolitics. In his view, Panda (2024) argues that the competing geopolitical narratives—such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and China's regional ambitions—are the main forces shaping international relations and nations' alliances in this region. By highlighting the vital importance of maritime connectivity and the projection of naval power in the region, Brewster (2024) positions naval strategy at the core of the Indo-Pacific security order.

The U.S.-China rivalry has altered the region's security dynamics, leading to more active alliance politics and the concurrent development of uncertain relations among regional states, according to researchers focused on great-power rivalry (Campbell & Ratner, 2024; Waqar et al., 2025). Studies on the behavior of intermediate powers show that pragmatic hedging and flexible balancing work well together. Smith (2025) claims that Japan, India, and Australia are using several tactics to manage strategic risk, including cooperation, deterrence, and restraint. At the same time, the technological and economic factors in the competition have become the most significant. While Rafique (2025) highlights the strategic implications of the Digital Silk Road and cyber rivalry, Rolland (2024) examines the transformation of the regional economic order brought about by China's Belt and Road Initiative. According to Ferguson (2024), semiconductor supply

chains have become a crucial arena of conflict among technology, security, and power, complicating Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

### Discussion and Findings

The Indo-Pacific security environment is increasingly defined by the interplay of structural power shifts, evolving alliance architectures, and the agency of regional actors. This study identifies three primary factors shaping this system: the intensification of great-power rivalry driven by China's assertive naval operations and US forward deterrence; the evolution of alliances from rigid bilateralism toward flexible mini-lateral arrangements that enable issue-specific cooperation without formal treaty obligations; and the growing adoption of hedging strategies among regional states to navigate uncertainty (Chauhdry et al., 2025). Beyond these structural dynamics, non-traditional threats—including cyberattacks, grey-zone operations, illegal fishing, and climate-induced instability—place additional strain on already complex regional security mechanisms.

The findings indicate that the Indo-Pacific is not merely an arena of great-power competition but a dynamic strategic space in which overlapping power projections, shifting alliances, and regional agency converge to create enduring uncertainty. States such as India, the Philippines, and Pakistan adopt strategies informed as much by domestic political constraints and threat perception as by formal alliance structures (Saeed et al., 2025). Mini-lateral arrangements and issue-specific cooperation reflect a pragmatic response to uncertainty, enabling states to maintain strategic flexibility without provoking confrontation (Khan, 2025; Waqar & Liaqat, 2025). In this context, strategic ambiguity has emerged as a deliberate policy instrument, signaling that Indo-Pacific security dilemmas arise not only from material power shifts but also from inconsistent signaling, competing normative frameworks, and legitimacy narratives advanced by the United States and China.

Australia's trajectory from hedging toward a more confrontational posture exemplifies the intersection of material capability, alliance dependence, and ontological insecurity. Deeper integration into AUKUS and advocacy for maritime security in the South China Sea are framed as deterrence measures; yet they simultaneously reinforce Chinese perceptions of containment and contribute to mutual mistrust (Korolev, 2023; Li, 2025). This study emphasizes that Australia's securitization of China cannot be understood solely through geopolitical reasoning: identity anxiety, normative allegiance to a Western-led order, and the politics of reassurance play decisive roles (Wolpe, 2023). Australia's

behavior demonstrates that a middle-power strategy is not merely reactive but is shaped by the interpretive and ethical dimensions of security decision-making.

Japan illustrates how a middle power can balance constitutional constraints with FOIP objectives. Despite pacifist legal limitations, it has expanded its defense posture, enhanced interoperability with the United States, and engaged in maritime governance initiatives across the Indo-Pacific (Panda, 2024; Smith, 2025). Japan's approach reflects strategic hedging informed by both material and normative considerations, aiming to maintain regional stability while asserting normative leadership in maritime law, freedom of navigation, and democratic governance. This study finds that Japan exemplifies how middle powers localize global norms, reconciling externally imposed expectations with domestic political and cultural imperatives.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy demonstrates a deliberate combination of autonomy and selective alignment. By strengthening naval capabilities, deepening US cooperation, and leading regional initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, India exemplifies hedging coupled with strategic engagement (Brewster, 2024; Smith, 2025). India's approach reflects perceptual calculus: threat assessments consider China's maritime expansion, Pakistan's strategic posture, and the US's regional commitment. This study argues that India's strategy underscores the importance of integrating identity, threat perception, and normative reasoning into security analysis, balancing adherence to global norms with preservation of strategic autonomy.

ASEAN demonstrates the complexity of regional cohesion under competing great-power pressures. Post-Cold War adaptation of norms within ASEAN reveals that common security norms were selectively internalized because they aligned with principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, whereas norms such as humanitarian intervention conflicted with entrenched cognitive frameworks, resulting in limited adoption (Acharya, 1991, 1997b; Aggarwal, 1998). ASEAN's mixed posture—asserting neutrality while navigating China's influence and US engagement—illustrates localization in practice, with regional states managing risk through adaptive diplomacy, mini-lateral cooperation, and selective participation in external security architectures.

The Philippines highlights the influence of domestic politics and normative commitments on security behavior. While seeking US security guarantees, the Philippines simultaneously engages in economic and maritime cooperation with China, demonstrating

how smaller powers actively navigate between normative adherence and strategic necessity, managing security dilemmas without provoking escalation. Understanding Philippine behavior requires attention to both material security concerns and the interpretive frameworks through which threats are assessed.

Historical rivalries, strategic dependencies, and economic imperatives inform Pakistan's approach to Indo-Pacific security. Its regional engagement is primarily shaped by threat perceptions from India, evolving Chinese partnerships, and selective multilateral initiatives. Pakistan reinforces the argument that regional actors cannot be understood solely through alliance structures, as domestic priorities and identity-driven threat perceptions shape strategic decisions.

China's assertive regional behavior—maritime expansion, Belt and Road initiatives, and cyber-enabled operations—demonstrates the centrality of material capabilities and normative influence in shaping regional security dynamics. China's actions are both defensive, aimed at securing perceived core interests, and assertive, projecting power to challenge US predominance. Understanding Chinese strategy requires examining structural ambitions alongside discursive narratives, highlighting the interplay of material and ideational factors. The United States anchors Indo-Pacific security through a hub-and-spoke alliance system, forward-deployed deterrence, and normative leadership that emphasizes democracy and the rules-based order. However, the study highlights a growing perception gap between US intentions and regional interpretations, producing strategic uncertainty despite material preponderance. This underscores the limits of structural power alone in shaping regional outcomes and the necessity of incorporating cognitive, normative, and ethical dimensions in analyses of great-power influence.

Indo-Pacific security increasingly spans multiple domains beyond traditional land, sea, and air theaters. Cybersecurity, near-space operations, digital infrastructure resilience, and semiconductor supply-chain competition have emerged as critical arenas of strategic rivalry (Cheung, 2014; Ferguson, 2024; Rafique, 2025). These domains complicate deterrence, blur the line between peace and conflict, and compel middle powers to adopt flexible, adaptive, and often ambiguous strategies. Regional responses to non-traditional threats reveal the interplay between material capacity, normative reasoning, and strategic imagination.

A critical contribution of this study is foregrounding the ethical and interpretive dimensions of security analysis. Middle powers navigate dilemmas not only through capabilities and alliances but also through identity-driven threat perception, selective norm adoption, and moral reasoning. Strategic ambiguity, hedging, and mini-lateral cooperation are thus not technical measures alone but cognitively and ethically informed strategies, reflecting nuanced judgments about legitimacy, sovereignty, and normative alignment.

The study demonstrates that Indo-Pacific insecurity cannot be explained solely through material power rivalry. Rather, it emerges from the intersection of structural competition, regional agency, and normative contestation. Great-power rivalry, evolving alliance architectures, and hedging strategies collectively produce a security environment defined by uncertainty, interpretive complexity, and strategic flexibility. Regional actors are active agents who localize norms, manage ontological anxieties, and deploy strategic ambiguity to preserve autonomy amid competing legitimacy frameworks. By integrating defensive realism with ontological security theory, this study provides a novel explanatory lens for understanding middle-power behavior, particularly Australia's securitization of China, and offers a framework for interpreting how classical and non-traditional threats, legitimacy struggles, and adaptive strategies converge to sustain instability even in the absence of large-scale war.

These findings carry direct policy implications. Understanding middle powers' normative reasoning, threat perception, and hedging behaviors is crucial for designing effective deterrence, conflict prevention, and multilateral security frameworks. By emphasizing cognitive, ethical, and interpretive dimensions alongside material capabilities, this study enriches the analytical toolkit for scholars and policymakers seeking to navigate the evolving, multifaceted security landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

This study demonstrates that Indo-Pacific security cannot be fully understood through the lens of material rivalry or alliance structures alone. Instead, it is the product of a complex interplay between structural shifts, regional agency, and normative interpretation, in which middle powers actively shape, contest, and adapt to the pressures of great-power competition. By highlighting the cognitive and ethical dimensions of strategic behavior, this study shows that states do not merely react to external constraints but continuously reinterpret threats, recalibrate hedging strategies, and negotiate their autonomy within fluid legitimacy frameworks. The convergence of strategic ambiguity, mini-lateral cooperation,

and selective norm localization reveals a region in which uncertainty itself becomes a strategic resource, allowing actors to preserve flexibility and influence without triggering confrontation. Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific emerges not as a static chessboard dominated by the US and China, but as a dynamic arena of interpretive struggle, where the decisions of middle powers, informed by identity, perception, and ethical reasoning, critically shape both the trajectory of regional security and the conceptual frameworks through which scholars understand it. This approach provides a new, more nuanced lens for security science, encouraging future research to examine not only what states do, but why they choose to act as they do in the shadow of uncertainty and competing moral orders.

### **Conclusion**

This study argues that an integrated approach, incorporating perception, strategic narratives, ethical reasoning, and power shifts, is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of Indo-Pacific security, rather than relying solely on military frameworks. It is acknowledged that the region's security posture is characterized by ongoing strategic uncertainty rather than clear war or peace, due to the interaction of new hybrid threats, economic interconnectedness, and past military legacies. As a result, the Indo-Pacific region's security challenges are both interpretive and material; nations in the region continue to interpret the situation and justify their actions in light of shifting power dynamics. While acknowledging the existence of middle powers and regional players who use the previously mentioned war-like tactics of selective alignment, mini-lateral cooperation, and strategic ambiguity to manage risks and preserve their autonomy, the study serves to open up the debate on the inadequacy of models based on alliances and Western legalism to explain regional security governance. The Sino-American competition is still regarded as a significant structural determinant, but rather than being directly confrontational, it shapes perceptions, ethical issues, and normative frameworks. The Indo-Pacific region's preference for flexible, consensus-based security arrangements can be explained by applying localization theory, which highlights that normative change in the region is not only partial but also progressive, shaping local identities and institutional practices rather than imposing global standards. The deterioration of Australia-China ties is an obvious illustration of how ontological insecurity, alliance thinking, and moral stances not only intensify the rivalry but also inject a competitive element that realistic approaches fail to depict effectively. As a result, this study highlights the fact that the Indo-Pacific

region will only be stable in the long run if there are moderated conflicts, ongoing communication, ethical self-control, and new institutions capable of handling both the rivalry for resources and the battle of ideas; otherwise, the region will become a hotspot for strategic rivalry rather than a place for cooperation in the global landscape of security and economic interaction.

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