

CHAPTER 10

Trump 2.0 and United States-Led Security Alliances in the Indo-Pacific Region: Withered Leadership or a New Course of Action?

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Introduction

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The United States (US) presidency has a long-standing history of honour and prestige. However, the inauguration of Donald Trump as America's 45th president in 2017 undoubtedly raised much criticism, mainly due to his actions and rhetoric as well as a decline in democracy and fragmented foreign policy (Rowland, 2021). However, on 20 January 2025, Trump was sworn in for the second time as America's 47th president, after a 312-vote win against opponent Kamala Harris (FitzGerald, 2024). Since taking office, Trump has signed numerous orders, including the controversial halt of foreign aid. As America repositions itself to the 'Make America Great Again' stance, how it will fracture in the Indo-Pacific security framework and strategic alliance formation, is worth exploring. The Indo-Pacific region, comprised of the vast Indian and Pacific oceans, has pivoted as a power play arena where major powers compete and cooperate on mutual interests (Doyle and Rumley, 2019). Alliance building had warranted a key focus of the US's Indo-Pacific approach under the previous Biden administration to counter an assertive China. This appears to be a rhetoric for the current Trump administration, as US Secretary of State Marco

Rubio pledged to promote the Indo–Pacific alliance’s work after meeting with foreign ministers from Japan, Australia, and India at the Quad meeting, just a day after Trump’s inauguration (Brunnstrom, Lewis and Pal, 2025).

Trump’s latest moves, however, suggest a rhetoric of unpredictability and fragmentation in global and regional foreign policy pursuits. Trump’s move to dismantle foreign aid and demand that North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members spend 5 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence implicates security alliances in the Indo–Pacific region, particularly for the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK). In addition, the strained US–Ukraine relations further complicate US–EU relations, and the implications thereof for security cooperation in the Indo–Pacific must be considered. Further, Australia, a member state of the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS), has increased its defence budget by US\$6.66 billion over the next four years as pressure mounts from Trump to increase defence spending (Needham, 2025). The impact of strained US–Australia relations could potentially impact the future of AUKUS.

In the Indo–Pacific region, US security leadership can be traced through strategic partnerships such as the Quadrilateral (Quad) alliance, consisting of the US, Australia, India and Japan and the AUKUS alliance. These alliances reinforce America’s strategic interests in the region—they largely focus on broad areas such as regional security, economic development and technological cooperation, as well as strengthening defence cooperation, notably through advanced military technology exchanges. Together, these partnerships demonstrate the US’s capabilities to counter emerging rivalries, maintain maritime security, and ensure stability in the Indo–Pacific region (Bisley, 2025). The US considers the Indo–Pacific to be the most strategically important region in the twenty-first century, accounting for over two-thirds of global economic production and crucial sea routes such as the South China Sea (Hu, 2020). For Washington, the Quad serves as a diplomatic and economic conduit, while AUKUS is mostly for the deterrence of aggression, mainly

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stemming from China. Over the last five years, the US has rapidly increased its spending on Indo-Pacific security. The US House of Representatives under the Biden administration passed an Indo-Pacific Bill in 2024 totalling US\$8.1 billion allocated for submarine capacity growth with the Department of Defence and Military Construction budgets, and support for Taiwan and other regional allies, including military equipment transfers (Fiddler, 2024). The Indo-Pacific Bill, alongside aid for Ukraine and Israel, was labelled as 'national security priorities'.

However, as Trump's isolationist stance intensifies, the US leadership in the Indo-Pacific is poised for significant changes. It is unclear if the Trump administration will prioritise the Indo-Pacific security domain, and if strategic security partnerships are relevant to the current US foreign policy objectives. As such, this chapter seeks to examine US leadership under the Trump 2.0 administration on strategic security alliances in the Indo-Pacific region. To achieve its objective, the paper presents a discussion of three critical areas. In the first section, the chapter examines the Indo-Pacific region's reaction to Trump 2.0's foreign policy. In section two, a discussion of the US-led security alliances in the Indo-Pacific is presented, with a focus on the Quad and AUKUS alliances. And thirdly, Trump's legacy and the future of US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region are analysed.

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These discussions will be framed around the theoretical tenets of structural/neorealist theory as broadened by Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001). Neorealist theory is selected for its relevance to the unfolding geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific region where security forms the very fundamental survival of states—the Trump administration's 'hard-line' strategic competition with China marking the Indo-Pacific as a key arena for regional competition. Further, neorealist ideals such as the US label of China as a 'revisionist state' and a threat to US national security, establishing a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific as a counterbalance to China and a pivot of coalitions of like-minded nations to balance China's rise, as well as focus on boosting arms sales and defence cooperation in the region. This helps frame Trump's approach in the Indo-Pacific and allows for better mapping out what his second

administration's regional objectives and implications will be on US security leadership in the region. In this regard, we conclude with remarks on the impact of Trump's neorealist approach on US security leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

Theoretical framework

According to Zimmerman (2001), theories enhance one's understanding and knowledge by predicting and explaining previously unknown phenomena. These theories are critical in explaining various experiences. This chapter sheds light on structural/neorealism to examine US leadership in Indo-Pacific security alliances under the second Trump administration. The focus on security in the Indo-Pacific is crucial, since the region hosts several security threats, including the Taiwan conflict, the India-China boundary dispute and maritime disputes involving the South and East China Seas (Heiduk, 2022).

234 Structural realism, widely popularised by Kenneth Waltz (1979), posits that security concerns and the anarchic nature of the international system shape and influence state behaviours and actions. Waltz' 1979 study titled *Theory of International Politics* argues that the anarchic nature of the international system explains recurring patterns like power balances, war proneness and alliance formation due to the socialisation of states to imitate each other. Neorealism, much like classical realism (Lebow, 2024), ignores human nature and focuses more on structural units such as shifts of power. Thus, neorealists highlight three systems: unipolar, where there is one great power, bipolar, which consists of two great powers and multipolar, which involves more than two great powers (Hansen, 2010). Due to the lack of central authority in the international system, states are concerned with their survival and thus prioritise security. This is validated by two sets of structural neorealism thought, that is, offensive and defensive, albeit in different ways. Offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer assert that the ultimate goal of states is to attain power (Mearsheimer, 2001). Therefore, offensive realism would expect the Indo-Pacific nations to invest more in military capabilities to dominate the region; in that way, they can ensure their survival and

independence (Hu, 2022). On the other hand, defensive realists such as Waltz (1979) argue that states are restricted in their power pursuit and primarily seek power to achieve an equilibrium.

Waltz (1979) further posits that security is best achieved when states enhance capabilities through internal and external balance, which prevents powerful states from achieving hegemony and promotes a stable power balance. Therefore, defensive neorealism in the Indo-Pacific would demand nuances of inclusivity and regional integration ideals as seen in the mandate of the Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN), for which the general consensus among regional actors is that ASEAN is the centre of the Indo-Pacific region (Beeson and Lee-Brown, 2021; Mmako, 2024). In addition, strategic partnerships and alliances in the Indo-Pacific such as AUKUS and the Quad are best described by Waltz defensive realist thought—they are considered as measures that aim to prevent potential aggression and defend strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, rather than seeking dominance in response to China's growing influence (Fong, 2023).

Under the neorealism framework, pursuing national interests is a form of statecraft driven by the inherent anarchy of the international system. Recent developments in the Trump 2.0 administration demonstrate the weaponisation of economic leverage to deter a growing China. This is exemplified by a tariff rise of 125 per cent on Chinese goods over and above existing trade barriers imposed on the nation (Kong, 2025). Moreover, Trump 2.0 leadership in the Indo-Pacific region seems to be leaning more towards offensive realism. As geopolitical tensions escalate between the US and China, Taiwan is likely to be the centre of Trump's security focus in the Indo-Pacific as a continuum of US-China geopolitical rivalry. Furthermore, as Mearsheimer (2001) suggests that states are primarily concerned with acquiring power, it remains uncertain whether the Trump 2.0 administration will prioritise strengthening trust with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in security matters¹.

1 As it stands, Trump's offensive neorealist approach on global partners, namely NATO members and the EU allies may implicate security partnerships and engagements in the Indo-Pacific on mutual interests, namely deterring China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road Initiative flagships in the Indo-Pacific region as well as maintaining a rules-based order in the region (Posaner et al., 2025).

Indo-Pacific regional reaction to Trump 2.0 foreign policy

The US has long maintained ties to the Indo-Pacific, dating back to 1784 with trading merchandise that served China (Kolakowski, 2018). Indeed, the US has long regarded itself as a 'Pacific nation'. It is, therefore, expected that the Indo-Pacific would probe into Trump's foreign policy objectives in the region. This time, however, the region is faced with an aggressive stance of an 'America First' approach. Over the last four years, the Biden administration aimed to foster cross-regional cooperation and establish various mini-laterals in the Indo-Pacific region—including US–Japan–Australia, US–Japan–Republic of Korea (ROK), US–Japan–India and US–Japan–the Philippines—resulting in institutionalising these partnerships to the level of quasi-alliance (Yatsumi, 2024). Yet, uncertainties in the Trump 2.0 foreign policy approach linger questions of whether these partnerships will be capable enough to withstand another term of the 'Americentrism'.² India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's call with Trump and official visit shortly after Trump's inauguration signalled two key takeaways: firstly, the need to gain assurance of US continued commitment to strengthen ties with India amid global tariff threats and US commitment to enhancing their strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific and Indo-Pacific Quad collaboration, with India set to host the first Quad Leaders in 2025 (Biswas and Inamdar, 2025).

Akin to the US, India regards China as a strategic rival in the Indo-Pacific and the unfolding re-emergence of the US–China trade war and geopolitical contest is likely to centre on bilateral engagements in Indo-Pacific matters. The reimposition of tariffs on China could have significant implications for China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. Trump tariffs are expected to target critical sectors such as electronics, steel and consumer goods, causing Chinese export revenue to plummet (Klomp, 2025). However, Trump's protectionist approach may pave the way for heightened Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly on ASEAN relations. Since taking office, Trump has imposed tariffs on

2 Delanaye, Pottel and Glasscock (2022: 856) describes Americentrism as 'a term signifying a tendency to view the world in an overly American-focused perspective'.

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individual ASEAN nations, namely, Cambodia (49 per cent), Laos (48 per cent), Vietnam (46 per cent), and Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have rates between 10 per cent and 36 per cent (Yeoh 2025). While most ASEAN nations export heavily to the US, China remains their largest trade partner, and the escalation of US–China tensions may push for closer ASEAN–China ties despite ASEAN’s unresponsiveness to tariff hikes.³ Further, to mitigate losses due to US-imposed tariffs, China may increase its focus on regional trade alliances, such as strengthening the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or boosting its BRI. It is important to note that the RCEP is the world’s largest free trade agreement and China trade with RCEP members has frequently accounted for over 30 per cent of its net trade (Khan, Ali and Shah, 2022). As a key player, China’s influence in the RCEP is expected to expand, and given US tariff hikes on some of the ASEAN nations that are also RCEP and BRI members, China may gain favour against an ‘aggressive’ US in the Indo-Pacific. China’s economic leverage far outweighs the US albeit, security guarantees for regional members favours the US. Therefore, as geopolitical tensions rise between the two rivals, how regional members reciprocate, whether through hedging or side picking, will determine a rising US or China regional influence.

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Regionally, however, current US efforts in the Indo-Pacific are in a state of suspense. For instance, Shoji (2025) states that with Trump’s geoeconomic pullback through tariffs and global aid scrap, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)’s future is unclear. Globally, Trump’s stance on Hamas in the Israel–Palestine conflict prompt Malaysia to showcase its support to Hamas and has often lobbied in the United Nations (UN) for Palestine—this may have also motivated Malaysia to apply for BRICS membership (Shoji, 2025). Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand alongside Malaysia are BRICS partner countries.

3 In an article published by the South China Morning Post, ASEAN has refused to retaliate against Trump’s tariffs against individual members and has instead chosen open communication and collaboration with the US. ASEAN ideals are based on cooperation, dialogue and engagements and peace and security. For full article, see: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3305931/hitched-trumps-tariff-roller-coaster-anxious-asean-ministers-meet-malaysia>

Also implicated is South Africa's⁴ dwindled relations with the US under the Trump 2.0 presidency and how their engagement will unfold in the Indian Ocean region must be considered. Perhaps even more concerning is the apprehension that is rapidly spreading in America's backyard—the Pacific region. Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and aid retreat threatens the survival of the island nations as expressed by Samoa's Prime Minister (Jackson, 2025). The Pacific Islands like the island nations in the Indian Ocean region are greatly impacted by climate change and rely heavily on forums such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organisation (WHO) for assistance in climate adaptation, disaster management and the resilience to harsh weather. Trump's first week of office saw the US removal from both these forums, a significant decision affecting the Indo-Pacific region and the rest of the world's efforts to address the impact of climate and global health crisis (Jackson, 2025).

US-led security alliances in the Indo-Pacific: A focus on the Quad and AUKUS

For many years, security studies have mainly focused on war and ways to prevent it (Buzan and Hansen, 2009). However, many changes have occurred since the end of the cold war, necessitating a broader thinking into what security is and how it should be understood in a globalised world. For instance, the surge of maritime security concept was a result of rising threats at sea, such as piracy, terrorism and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing (Okafor-Yarwood and Onuoha, 2023). The Indo-Pacific region gained prominence due to its emergence as a hub for social mobility and economic growth, largely driven by commercial maritime activity and security assurance. The US has played a crucial role in the provision of regional security, and strategic alliance building has been a focal point (Townshend and Crabtree, 2022). When the Quad alliance (comprising Australia, India, Japan and the US) was established

4 South Africa is a regional member of the Indian Ocean region and a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

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in 2004, its key mandate was on humanitarian concerns to offer assistance and support following the Tsunami catastrophe, which devastated the Indian Ocean region. However, as geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific heightened, so did the Quad mandate change, largely focusing on security amid a rising and assertive China, leading to the rise of the Quad 2.0 in 2017 with a key focus on fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific. This vision was premised on three guiding principles: cooperation on broad regional matters such as maritime security, health, climate change etcetera, continual dialogue at various levels, including leaders' summits and foreign ministers' meetings and joint military exercises including the Malabar naval exercises⁵ (Kliem, 2020). While it encompasses security concerns, the Quad's agenda is broader than AUKUS, focusing on promoting a rules-based international order and practical cooperation across multiple sectors. Recent activities in early 2025 include foreign ministers' meetings reaffirming their commitment and joint efforts in disaster relief and military training exercises (Brunnstrom et al., 2025).

During the first Trump administration, China had already reached greater heights in strategic outreach within the Indo-Pacific and globally. In this realisation, policymakers in the US, Japan, Australia and India began implementing the idea of the Indo-Pacific as an interconnected region as a 'containment' strategy against China (Mohan and Govella, 2022). By then, Japan's then Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, advocated strongly for cooperation between the four Quad nations. This led to regular meetings of senior officials and eventually, the convention of the first Quad foreign ministers in 2019 in New York City. However, it was under the Biden administration that the US leadership in the security environment of the Indo-Pacific region was prevalent. In March 2021, the US hosted the inaugural Quad leaders' summit, marking the Biden administration's first major summit, emphasising the Quad's significance as the primary policy vehicle in the region.

Following the summit, the Quad released its first joined statement and

5 The Malabar exercises are naval exercises involving the US, India, Japan and recently, Australia in 2020. These exercises highlight the growing synergy among the Quad nations and showcase their security mandate in fostering joint efforts to establish a favourable maritime security framework in the Indo-Pacific region (see Haldar, 2024).

the launch of the vaccines, climate, and critical, emerging technologies, infrastructure coordination, cyber and space quickly followed suit, marking the formalisation of the group (Mohan and Govella, 2022). The Quad was also significant for Biden's promotion of a 'networked security architecture' through strategic alliance building. Although the pivot of the Quad highlights a successful US regional security mandate, the challenge of the isolation of key regional structures persists. This pertains to the sidelining of ASEAN in matters that implicate the region. Koga (2023) argues that the Quad's exclusive stance may marginalise ASEAN and hinder collaboration on issues like the South China Sea dispute. The question of ASEAN centrality emphasised in the Quad members' Indo-Pacific Strategies further complicate the Quad's mandate of maintaining a rules-based order and Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FIOP) ideals, largely pertaining to an anti-China stance.

The first Trump administration described China as a 'strategic rival' and thereby centralised Asia in the US foreign policy (Ünsal, 2023). The Biden administration also followed this path. This led to broadening the security agenda of the US beyond the Quad to establishing more minilateral groupings founded on containing an aggressive China. The establishment of AUKUS in 2021 by the US, Australia and the UK was formed to deepen diplomatic, security, and defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region (Novita, 2022). AUKUS builds on an already existing intelligence alliance, known as the 'Five Eyes' between the US, Australia, UK and New Zealand.⁶ What makes AUKUS unique to the 'Five Eyes' alliance lies in its security cooperation and defence mandate. This includes acquiring weaponry, particularly nuclear-powered submarines (Novita, 2022). The agreement in AUKUS is that Australia will acquire eight nuclear-powered submarines under the support of the Royal Australian Navy.

The US commitment to the partnership is largely traced during the Biden administration where US congress passed US\$3.4 billion to support AUKUS submarine acquisition (Townshend and Crabtree, 2022).

6 The 'Five Eyes' alliance plays a strategic position in the Indo-Pacific region through its intelligence-sharing system and impact on regional security and geopolitics.

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However, the AUKUS treaty's supply of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia faces new challenges due to US tariffs and concerns that the submarines may decrease deterrence against China (Needham, 2025). As part of the AUKUS arms agreement, the US is set to provide Australia with three to five Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines, with the first one expected to be delivered in 2032. This agreement is part of a deterrence strategy against China and a reflection of common interests and values. However, Australia has a deadline of 2025 to pay the US US\$2 billion to enhance its submarine shipyards, and how the Trump 2.0 administration navigates the deadline will influence the future of AUKUS. As it stands, shifts in US foreign policy, disorienting its allies, particularly the European region, holds implications for US leadership and the impact on security alliances in the region. Trump's backtrack from support of Ukraine and NATO as well as the UK's designed submarine, AUKUS-ISNN's failure to tailor Australia's needs—the submarine is too big and costly for Australia's geographical and strategic needs and may impact AUKUS initiatives (Briggs, 2025). The UK itself has a declined defence budget, and its focus is primarily on NATO, as AUKUS lags.

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The Trump 2.0 presidency is his final administration, making him ineligible for a third term under the Twenty-second Amendment to the US Constitution (Nicholas et al., 2025). However, actions implemented by the current administration may have an impact on US foreign policy in the future, particularly in terms of recovering global trust, reestablishing alliances and partnerships and re-building US global leadership. US security alignment within the Quad and AUKUS under the Trump 2.0 administration may face clashes. For instance, in an article published by The Times of India⁷ in 2024, the Quad leaders raised security concerns over the Israel–Palestine conflict, calling for a two-state solution to end the war. Trump's recent stance on the war is contradictory, proposing neighbouring nations to take in Palestinians, in an attempt to 'clean out' Gaza (Cuddy and Donnison, 2025). In addition, most of the Quad and AUKUS nations have expressed their support for Ukraine in the Russia–

7 For full article, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/states-must-refrain-what-quad-members-said-on-ukraine-gaza-china/articleshow/113566458.cms>

Ukraine war, a clear contradiction to Trump's 'conditional support' for Ukraine on the basis of access to rare earth minerals in exchange for financial support (Leonard, 2025). The UK has been a strong supporter of Ukraine, providing military and humanitarian assistance—this may implicate US–UK relations, also noting UK's foreign secretary David Lammy remarks that the 'US land seizure of Greenland is not going to happen' (Wintour, 2025). Internal tensions unfolding in these security pacts under the Trump 2.0 administration are inevitable and may likely impact security cooperation in the Indo–Pacific region.

Perhaps, the question that must be raised here is, can the Quad and AUKUS survive Trump's transactional approach? Indeed, the future of these strategic partnerships under the Trump 2.0 administration remains opaque. However, it can be argued that despite uncertainties, the Quad and AUKUS will likely continue to garner US support even under the current Trump presidency. Firstly, it is important to echo that Trump's increased demands from key regional partners and allies such as Australia and NATO partners in the EU could strain relations and weaken security cooperation (Puri, 2025). However, one aspect that is clear is that China remains America's biggest threat in the Indo–Pacific region and globally—this we argue, will greatly influence Trump's continued security agenda in the Indo–Pacific. AUKUS for instance, is more than a transactional arms partnership, but rather, a deterrence effort by Australia and the US as its key regional partner, to China's military upscale in both the Indian and Pacific regions.

The US–China competition in the current Trump 2.0 administration is undoubtedly beyond trade tit-for-tat but transcends to geostrategic rivalry where Taiwan is the focal point. During the first Trump administration, the US strengthened diplomatic and economic ties with Taiwan—the US sold more than \$18 billion USD in arms and Trump telephonically spoke with Taiwan's Tsai ahead of his inaugurations (Maizland and Fong, 2025). Biden further deepened ties with Taiwan by becoming the first US president to officially invite Taiwan's representatives to Washington. Although Trump is yet to indicate a position in Taiwan–China tensions, neither Beijing nor Washington have backed from the threat of the use of force for either

reunification in the case of China and defending Taiwan for the US (Maizland and Fong, 2025).

Further, the Trump 2.0 presidency seems to be following a pattern of seeking to demonstrate America's greatness and we argue that it is this pattern that will drive US leadership and support in the Indo-Pacific despite transactional and isolationist approaches to regional partners and allies as a demonstration of America's capabilities in the region. Further, following Modi's visit to Washington, both leaders have agreed to elevate defence cooperation, including deploying US and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, this recent bilateral engagement resulted in the launch of the US-India COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology) for the twenty-first Century to drive transformative change and cooperation, as well as pivoting the new ten-year framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership (The White House, 2025). Therefore, with the rising need to assert leadership in the Indo-Pacific, Trump will likely continue to support the Quad and AUKUS, and these strategic partnerships will likely influence the Trump 2.0 era.

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Trump's legacy and the future of the US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region

In 2017, the US officially adopted the Indo-Pacific term as a replacement for the traditional 'Asia-Pacific' in key national strategic policy documents and as a new approach towards Asia (Medcalf, 2018). Previously, the notion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FIOP) was anchored by Shinzo Abe, who first formally articulated the FOIP concept in 2016, though its foundational ideas can be traced back to his 2007 speech in the Indian Parliament titled '*Confluence of the Two Seas*' (Schoeman and Wu, 2022). In this earlier speech, Abe emphasised the growing strategic importance of the convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the need for a broader Asia that included a rising India. The Trump 2.0 administration formally adopted the FOIP vision, elevating it to a core component of its national security strategy. Prior, President Obama had declared to the

Australian Government in 2011, ‘With most of the world’s nuclear power and half of humanity, Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress’ (The White House, 2011: para. 15).

Indeed, the rise of Asia, particularly China’s ascent, fuelled a pivot of US focus in the Indo–Pacific region and broader Asia. This pivot began with the adoption of the Indo–Pacific term in policy use and the formation of various strategic partnerships, alliances and minilateral groupings. Furthermore, the renaming of the United States Indo–Pacific Command (USPACOM) to the United States Indo–Pacific Command (US–INDOPACOM), and development of the US–Indo–Pacific Strategy signify strengthened US engagement, regional ties and policy centralisation to the Indo–Pacific. In fact, the Trump administration has implemented initiatives such as increased engagement in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands, policies promoting transparency and anti-corruption, as well as digital infrastructure and energy cooperation programs (Ford, 2020).

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The Trump 1.0 presidency had further placed a strong emphasis on India in its Indo–Pacific policy, understanding India’s key role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and as a strategic contender to China’s influence in the Indo–Pacific. Trump’s focus on the Quad held a strategic nuance—the Quad members are the Indo–Pacific’s largest democracies, aligning with Washington’s global promotion of democracy (Sen, 2023). Under Trump, India and the US signed a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership Agreement. The agreement emphasised India’s Indo–Pacific position and US involvement, with the US purchasing naval Apache helicopters from India to enhance its naval security capabilities (Sen, 2023). Furthermore, Trump’s visit to Asia and attendance at the ASEAN summit in 2017 signalled America’s commitment to the Indo–Pacific and strengthening US alliances and partnerships amidst a strengthened ASEAN–China ties (The White House, 2017). Yet, the Trump 2.0 administration’s imposition of higher tariffs on ASEAN nations could further weaken US assurance in the Indo–Pacific. As a result of higher tariffs, ASEAN nations are pursuing diversification and stronger regional integration to counter unprecedented shocks (Yeoh 2025). Further,

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Washington's vague strategy towards the Indo-Pacific during the Trump 1.0 presidency fostered distrust and led to a decrease in its regional influence. For instance, Trump's withdrawal from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018 led to its exclusion from a significant regional trade agreement, while weakening its leadership position—China leveraged the withdrawal by indicating its interest in joining the CPTPP (Mmako, 2024).

Unlike the Obama administration, which echoed the US as a Pacific nation and himself as 'America's first Pacific president' (Limaye, 2012:4), the Trump presidencies suggest a retraction from the former. Already, Trump has labelled climate change a 'scam' and a 'hoax', and the Republican Platform has vowed to prioritise nuclear power and other energy sources as a means to reduce the high cost of living and inflation (Talbot, 2024). By this anti-climate change stance, the Trump 2.0 administration risks US leadership and influence in the Pacific region—on the other hand, China has pledged support for the Pacific Islands to address the calamities of climate change (Wilson and Xin, 2025). China's regional support comes at a time when the US has cut down on foreign aid, further weakening US leadership in the region.

The Pacific region is also home to Australia and New Zealand, two of America's great allies in the region. Security frames the very essence of island nations' survival, a nuance that is one of the drivers of AUKUS security cooperation. Therefore, Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement could threaten the survival of the island nations. Many of the Pacific nations view the global community's inability to address climate change concerns as a 'death sentence', with Trump's pledge to revoke the Paris Agreement as a potential end (Ratuva, 2017:170). Recently, President Trump issued a proclamation allowing American commercial fishing in the Pacific Ocean as part of the 'America First' Fishing Policy (The White House, 2025). While this may boost the American economy, it holds environmental implications for the protected fishing areas, further impacting the Pacific region. Furthermore, Trump's stance on worldwide tariff rises does not exempt the Pacific nations. For instance, Timor-Leste got a 10 per cent tariff while Vanuatu, Nauru and Fiji were imposed with higher tariffs, 23 per cent, 30 per cent and

32 per cent, respectively (Howes, Wood and Chowdhury, 2025). While the Pacific nations are less impacted by the tariff hikes, unlike Asia, these tariffs, which impact the global economy, implicate the island nations. One thing is certain: Trump's hostility will have a significant impact on US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region remains strategic to the US interests, despite Trump's neorealist approach. The security dimension in this region is America's top priority amidst an assertive China. The Quadrilateral alliance and the trilateral AUKUS partnership are two of the explored security alliances in this chapter. Both these alliances are founded on anti-China ideals; thus, their mandate is to forge stronger security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific on common interests. Despite Trump's recent transactional and isolationist approaches in the Indo-Pacific engagements, the chapter concludes that the Quad and AUKUS will still garner US support to demonstrate US capabilities against a rising China. However, Trump's aggressive stance with regards to tariff imposition, withdrawal from key agreements, global aid cuts and pressurising regional partners to double down on defence spending, will likely taint US leadership in security guarantees for Indo-Pacific regional allies and partners. This may suggest continuation of a hedging strategy or side picking for some, as current US foreign policy becomes increasingly ambiguous.

The current Trump 2.0 administration's isolationist approach may likely erase the legacy established during Trump 1.0 administration, particularly the adoption of the Indo-Pacific term in policy, the remaining of the US-PACOM to US-INDOPACOM, adoption of US strategy towards the Indo-Pacific and various alliances and partnerships and US-led minilateral groupings. In essence, Trump's offensive realist approach, particularly the recent global tariff imposition will only push strategic partners and allies further from the US and perhaps even closer to China as a deterrence attempt. This may likely drive US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to forge regional security minilateral groupings outside US leadership. In conclusion, the trajectory of US foreign policy in

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the Indo-Pacific region under the current Trump 2.0 administration lacks in assurance of US commitment and leadership. While the Indo-Pacific strategic framework and increased focus on China are likely to persist, the manner in which the US interacts with its allies and navigates the complex geopolitical landscape may change considerably, greatly impacting regional security alliances. Lastly, the US's ability to strike a balance between the need for ongoing, cooperative engagement with its regional partners and a more assertive 'America First' agenda will ultimately determine its ability to continue playing a leading role in the Indo-Pacific's security framework, where, since the Obama and Trump 1.0 administrations, the US has managed to establish leadership in.

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