The Indo-Pacific's Dangerous Transition: Maritime Power and Strategic Fragmentation

by Kamran Bokhari - May 28, 2026

The summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping earlier this month was a hopeful sign that a strategic understanding is possible between the world's sole superpower and its largest industrial plant. The Trump administration's view, detailed in December in its National Security Strategy and in January in its National Defense Strategy, is that competition with China is manageable and does not require full-spectrum global confrontation. At the same time, the documents signal a rebalancing of U.S. global commitments toward the Western Hemisphere, while prioritizing selective engagement and burden-sharing in the Indo-Pacific. China, meanwhile, is expanding its naval operations beyond the first island chain. Together, these trends are compelling Washington's regional allies to strengthen their own security capabilities and assume greater defense responsibilities, setting up the Pacific basin as the primary theater in which this evolving equilibrium between the U.S. and China is being tested.

In a major step toward remilitarization, Japan on May 26 enacted a law establishing the centralized National Intelligence Council and National Intelligence Bureau. The move gives Tokyo a more unified national security decision-making and intelligence architecture – something it has lacked in the post-World War II era – and supports its expanding counterstrike and power-projection capabilities. China is sure to protest. Already during his summit with Trump, Xi reportedly was sharply critical of Japan's military buildup, providing what officials who spoke to the Financial Times described as the most heated exchange of the talks. Beijing is not sitting on its hands, however. This week, China's newest-generation Type 054B frigate was confirmed operating for the first time with the Chinese navy's Liaoning carrier strike group during "far seas" exercises in the Western Pacific, east of Taiwan and the Philippines, after transiting the Miyako Strait near Japan's Ryukyu Islands. For the U.S., this sort of one-step-forward, one-step-back dance is a good approximation of how it hopes to build a new regional order in the Western Pacific – but it's not without risks.

From the late 19th century until 1945, Japan was the principal non-Western imperial power in the Western Pacific, projecting influence across East and Southeast Asia in direct competition with Western colonial and maritime powers. Its attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 reflected Tokyo's assessment that U.S. oil embargoes and broader economic sanctions, combined with growing

American resistance to Japanese expansion, threatened the survival of its imperial project and necessitated a bid to neutralize the U.S. Pacific Fleet and secure operational freedom in the maritime domain. The resulting war, in other words, was the product of a collision between an expanding Japanese imperial system and an entrenched Anglo-American-centered Pacific order that Washington was actively defending and consolidating.

Since World War II, the U.S. has been the preeminent military power in the international system. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union emerged as a credible military competitor to the United States in key domains such as undersea warfare and strategic nuclear deterrence. However, it was never able to translate that military challenge into a durable regional order in the Pacific. Nor could it match the United States' integrated advantage across naval power, economic reach and alliance networks that anchored the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific system.

In the contemporary period, China is actively challenging U.S. preeminence in the Western Pacific maritime zone, narrowing gaps in "near-seas" capabilities while expanding its ability to operate beyond the first island chain. Yet even as Beijing functions as a global economic and technological competitor, the United States retains qualitative superiority in several key military domains. For Washington, the goal increasingly is to manage competition and avoid direct confrontation in the Pacific theater.

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The U.S. will closely monitor the continued expansion of China's blue-water naval capabilities east of the first island chain, considering them a key indicator of Beijing's evolving intent and operational reach in the Western Pacific. Although both sides have a strong interest in avoiding military confrontation, their structural imperatives are increasingly placing them on trajectories of heightened friction. China's natural evolution toward sustained far-seas operations and power projection runs

directly against the long-standing U.S. objective of preserving maritime primacy across the Pacific. As a result, even incremental shifts in China's naval posture are likely to carry outsized strategic significance, increasing the risk that routine presence and signaling could be misread.

It is likely to be some time before China's push toward sustained presence west of the second island chain translates into an immediate, fully developed security threat to the regional order. This means that the United States retains a window of opportunity to adapt its force posture, alliance architecture and maritime strategy to counterbalance Chinese expansion over the medium term. (Indeed, on May 26, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio was in New Delhi meeting with his Quad counterparts from India, Japan and Australia to coordinate Indo-Pacific security policy.) For U.S. allies in the Western Pacific, however, the trajectory of Chinese naval activity is already producing acute levels of strategic concern, given its proximity to critical sea lanes and contested littoral zones. The accelerating pace of Japanese defense reforms and operational alignment with partners underscores the degree to which Tokyo, in particular, already perceives the balance of power as shifting in ways that demand an urgent response.

Japan and other regional actors, including South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines, increasingly view the shifting U.S. posture and its efforts to steer relations with China toward strategic accommodation as unsettling for regional stability. These states have long relied on the United States as the central guarantor of their national and collective security, in a period when China's military power projection beyond the first island chain was limited and episodic. That context is now changing, with Beijing building a blue-water naval presence while U.S. commitments appear more selectively calibrated, creating uncertainty at the core of the regional order. In this evolving environment, Japan's rapid military normalization and trajectory toward more autonomous power-projection capabilities make the prospect of a direct China-Japan clash no longer remote and difficult to categorically rule out.

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