

## **China's Hybrid Response towards Emerging Security Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: A Defense Diplomacy Perspective**

**Kristoforus Evan Andriyanto<sup>1</sup> Rodon Pedrason<sup>2</sup> Anak Agung Banyu Perwita<sup>3</sup>  
Surachman Surjaatmadja<sup>4</sup>**

Defense Diplomacy Study Program, Faculty of Defense Strategy, Republic of Indonesia Defense University, Central Jakarta, DKI Jakarta, Indonesia<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>  
Email: [keandriyanto@gmail.com](mailto:keandriyanto@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The intensifying geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has made China employ a hybrid strategy to respond to emerging security alliances in the Indo-Pacific, such as the QUAD, AUKUS, JAPHUS, and SQUAD, by combining militarization, economic coercion, and selective diplomatic engagement, to resist perceived containment while avoiding direct conflict. This qualitative research aims to assess the effectiveness of the strategies and analyze the impact of the responses on regional security stability, through the lens of defense diplomacy and hybrid warfare theoretical framework. Rooted in realist principles, China's response complicates the effectiveness of alliance-based security frameworks and undermines traditional defense diplomacy norms. While China's assertive actions heighten regional tensions, its simultaneous engagement in bilateral economic deals and crisis management mechanisms offers temporary de-escalation. China's strategic maneuvers are designed to solidify its long-term hegemony and test the resilience of regional security frameworks while diminishing US influence.

**Keywords:** China, Alliance, Indo Pacific, Defense Diplomacy, Hybrid Warfare.



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### **INTRODUCTION**

The South China Sea, a nexus of global trade and energy resources, has become one of the main theaters of intensifying geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. China's sweeping territorial claims, encapsulated by the controversial "Ten-Dash Line," which was recently issued by China's Ministry of Natural Resources in August 2023, overlap with the exclusive economic zones of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Despite that the "line" appears to assert China's historical maritime claims, however, it is fueling decades of disputes with other claimant states. Similarly, the Senkaku Islands or Chinese called the Diaoyu Islands, are also complicated territorial issues between China and Japan, which relate to strategic interests and resource disputes in the East China Sea. On the other issue, China is also limiting Taiwan's autonomy to prevent it from developing closer ties with enemies and enhancing its national security. This creates different views between China and the West, showing conflicting narratives and making it harder to reach agreements, raising tensions in the Taiwan Strait. The Indo-Pacific region is strategically important, thus powerful nations try to counter China's influence (Amir & Krishnan, 2021). In this context, the formation of security alliances in recent years—such as the QUAD, AUKUS, JAPHUS, and SQUAD; has challenged Beijing's unilateral ambitions. These alliances rooted in shared democratic values and strategic deterrence, often framed as efforts to uphold a "rules-based international order" and prominent regional balancing strategy of the US, have triggered assertive countermeasures from China, reshaping the region's security dynamics.

In 2017, the United States revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or QUAD, involving India - Japan - Australia, with a renewed focus on regional security and strategic cooperation to address China's growing assertiveness and build resilience in the region. (Madan, 2022).

Eventually in 2021, by collaborating with the United Kingdom and Australia, the US formed AUKUS to enhance the defense capabilities of allies, particularly by providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and sharing advanced defense technologies (Leonova, 2022). Two years later, the US formed its 3rd alliance in the region with Japan and the Philippines, the so-called JAPHUS, aiming to create a more central role nuance for the US confronting China in the South China Sea. Lastly in 2024, the US strengthened its security cooperation with the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, which included the first island chain that serves as a natural barrier to China's naval expansion (Myers, 2024). This essay's objective is to answer the research question of how has China responded to emerging security alliances in the region, and what impact these responses have on regional security stability. In this regard, the researcher initially argues that China employs a hybrid strategy of military posturing, diplomatic coercion, and legal revisionism to counteract emerging alliances, creating a paradoxical cycle of escalation and managed stability in the Indo-Pacific region. While short-term tensions rise, Beijing's calculated maneuvers aim to solidify its long-term hegemony, testing the resilience of regional institutions or other security frameworks in the form of alliances, while also reducing the influence of external powers, particularly the US.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employs qualitative methods to better understand the problem and collect expert analyses of China's hybrid strategy. The researcher has chosen a case study approach to explore the intricate dynamics of China's responses to emerging security alliances. Creswell (2013) explains that qualitative methods help explore complex relationships and behaviors, and case studies provide in-depth insights through detailed data collection. This research will focus on an intrinsic case study, allowing for a thorough exploration of China's hybrid strategy in the context of the Indo-Pacific. The researcher will collect extensive data by reviewing relevant documents, including policy papers, academic articles, and official statements, to outline the various dimensions of China's responses. A comprehensive analysis will examine the depth over breadth, capturing the interplay of military, diplomatic, and legal tactics in China's strategy. Lastly, the researcher will interpret the findings and present them in a narrative that highlights key insights and lessons learned from the case study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Defense Diplomacy**

Defense diplomacy, rooted in ancient alliances like those of Greek city-states (Syawfi, 2009), has evolved from traditional military cooperation to a multifaceted tool for modern security. Historically, it involved armed forces and infrastructure to advance foreign policy, with scholars like Morgenthau (in Syawfi, 2009) emphasizing defense diplomacy in the form of military aid, influence management, and regime support. Eventually, in the post-Cold War, it shifted toward fostering partnerships through defense ministries, transforming entities into frameworks for addressing shared challenges (Sarjito and Perwita, 2024). Today, it prioritizes strategic engagement, using dialogue, joint training, and international forums to convert adversaries into partners (Sarjito and Perwita, 2024). Defense diplomacy is characterized as an act to balance regional stability, defense capability, and independence through diplomacy, security strategies, and industrial development. It is further explored by Syawfi (2009) from scholars Griffiths and O'Callaghan who stress defense diplomacy as diplomatic communication, while Viotti and Kauppi link defense diplomacy as the act of safeguarding nations against threats in an anarchic global system. Sarjito and Perwita (2024) outline three objectives of defense diplomacy: building trust and interoperability to reduce conflict risks, enhancing

regional stability through multilateral cooperation, and positioning states as responsible global actors. Its role addresses transnational security via collective action, emphasizing trust-building, policy negotiation, and peaceful conflict resolution. Cottey and Forster (2004) highlight its dual role as a deterrent and reassurance, distinct from purely military or political strategies. Furthermore, Sarjito and Perwita (2024) explore that the scope of defense diplomacy spans confidence building (joint exercises, exchanges), capacity enhancement (technological collaboration), and defense industry growth (research and development, procurement). Meanwhile, Syawfi (2009) underscores its broader aim: preventing conflict, promoting peaceful security goals, and addressing shared challenges through international cooperation. To comprehend this, defense diplomacy integrates diplomacy, defense, and development to foster global stability while advancing national interests.

### **Hybrid Warfare**

Hybrid warfare represents an evolving form of conflict that integrates various military strategies and tactics. This concept is characterized by the simultaneous use of diverse tactics by adversaries who adeptly blend traditional and irregular methods. Frank Hoffman in his seminal work entitled *“Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars”* (2007) defines hybrid warfare as the simultaneous use of diverse tactics by adversaries adept at blending traditional and irregular methods, which includes the use of conventional military forces alongside guerrilla tactics, cyber operations, and information warfare. This integration reflects the need for flexibility and adaptability in military operations, as modern conflicts often involve a range of actors and strategies that challenge traditional military paradigms. One of the defining features of hybrid warfare is the decentralized execution of tactics, which allows for rapid responses to changing battlefield conditions (Hoffman, 2007). Furthermore, the integration of advanced weaponry and disruptive technologies plays a crucial role in hybrid warfare, as adversaries leverage modern technologies such as precision-guided munitions and cyber capabilities to enhance their operational effectiveness (Ahluwalia, 2020). The use of mass communication for propaganda is also critical; hybrid adversaries exploit social media and other platforms to disseminate information, recruit personnel, and influence public perception, thereby shaping the narrative of the conflict in their favor (Hoffman, 2007). Furthermore, Hoffman (2007) identifies three key battlefields in hybrid warfare: the conventional battlefield, the local population, and the international community. Each of these arenas requires distinct strategies and tactics to effectively engage adversaries and achieve strategic objectives. The complexity of hybrid warfare necessitates a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, as traditional military forces must adapt to the challenges posed by hybrid adversaries.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Military Asymmetry: The Dual Edges of Power Projection**

China's militarization has been systematic and insidious; it sometimes remains silent while unknowingly preparing for an unseen menace. For instance, in the issue with the Philippines, Beijing has expanded its “gray-zone” tactics, deploying coastguard vessels and maritime militias to harass fishing boats and block resupply missions to Philippine-held features. In 2023 alone, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2023) data has shown that the China Coast Guard conducted over 200 incursions into the Philippines' EEZ, including laser-pointing incidents near Second Thomas Shoal. Moreover, China is also utilizing artificial islands as its outposts, such as Subi Reef and Fiery Cross Reef, that serve as forward bases to monitor rival activities and deter external intervention. According to Erickson & Kennedy (2016), China has equipped several artificial islands with runways, radar systems, and missile installations.

In addition, China is also preparing for a coercive response against any adversaries that could harm its interests. This has been seen on several occasions when People's Liberation Army Navy drills simulate blockade scenarios, particularly during the alliances' joint exercise was conducted. Aside from that, Erickson and Kennedy (2023) found that China has also deployed DF-26B ballistic missiles to Hainan Island that are capable of striking QUAD naval assets as far as Guam.

### **Diplomatic Coercion: Fracturing Regional Unity**

China has exploited ASEAN's consensus-driven model to weaken collective resistance. Thayer (2021) found that this has been done by offering bilateral infrastructure loans and preferential trade deals to Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, Beijing ensures these states veto stronger ASEAN statements on the South China Sea. For instance, during the 2016 ASEAN Summit, Cambodia blocked a joint communiqué criticizing China's island-building. China's "divide-and-rule" strategy has also stalled progress on a legally binding Code of Conduct, with negotiations repeatedly delayed by disputes over geographic scope and enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, China is also optimizing the use of inflammatory rhetoric framing, commonly known as narrative propaganda. In this context, Beijing has labeled SQUAD a "geopolitical gang" and "neo-colonialism," QUAD as an "Asian NATO" pursuing containment and encirclement, and denounced AUKUS as a "Pandora's Box" for nuclear proliferation.

### **Legal Revisionism: Rejecting International Adjudication**

As Gao and Jia (2018) found that China's dismissal of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling—which invalidated its historic rights claim over the South China Sea—underscores its rejection of UNCLOS-based dispute resolution, China is seeking to redefine maritime norms in its favor. This can be seen that China is consistently publishing "historical archives" to legitimize the claim, against any legal standing that other claimants proposed.

### **Economic Statecraft: Leveraging Trade and Aid, Implementing Economic Coercion**

Economic incentives play a crucial role in China's hybrid strategy. Heydarian (2024) found that Beijing offered the Philippines \$2.6 billion in low-interest loans for infrastructure projects in exchange for limiting joint drills, a strategy that was successfully applied in the previous presidential period that leaned more towards China and justifying China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea without any firm action. Under President Duterte, Heydarian (2020) observed that the Philippines received \$24 billion in Chinese investment pledges in exchange for downplaying the PCA ruling. This economic influence also similarly gained Malaysia's interest, as Storey (2022) found that Malaysia's muted response to Chinese coastguard incursions near Luconia Shoals correlates with its reliance on Chinese infrastructure financing. Another strategy China uses is by implementing economic coercion through sanctions and tariffs. According to China's Ministry of Commerce (2024), it retaliated with sanctions on Australian iron ore and Japanese semiconductor exports as well as halted rare earth exports to Japanese tech firms that further disrupted supply chains. In this context, Tow (2023) argues that China is punishing its roles in the security alliances which China views as directly threatening its interests and the fact that Australia supplies 60% of China's iron ore, making it vulnerable to economic coercion.

## **Discussion**

### **Effectiveness of China's Counter-Alliance Strategies**

The military strategy of China serves as the dual edge of power projection toward emerging alliances. On one hand, China's assertive actions and militarization of artificial islands

serve to challenge the influence of these alliances and assert its dominance in the region. Such actions not only demonstrate China's willingness to challenge the sovereignty of its neighbors, act as a deterrent to other claimant states and external powers, making it more challenging for adversaries to operate freely in the vicinity. In short, it is China's strategy to show its posture to the potential enemies, that China is capable and prepared to respond to any coercive actions that could harm its national interests. However, on the other hand, these aggressive tactics can provoke a counter-reaction from regional powers and the US, leading to increased military cooperation among allies. The joint military exercises and security dialogues initiated are direct responses to China's assertiveness, aimed at enhancing deterrence and fostering a united front against potential aggression. This dynamic creates a paradox where China's efforts to solidify its hegemony may inadvertently lead to greater regional cohesion among its adversaries. Meanwhile, the use of inflammatory rhetoric through framing and narrative propaganda is consistent with China's securitization strategy. This strategy aims to rally domestic nationalism and sway Global South opinion against Western alliances, which is reflected in the theoretical framework from Buzan et. al. (1998) where perceived threats are exaggerated to justify militarization and coercion.

China's hybrid strategy has also created a precarious equilibrium. While growing deterrence and solidified trust are shown by the alliances through joint exercises and concerned security dialogues as well as military aid and other capacity building initiatives, Beijing's bilateral economic deals and crisis-management mechanisms temporarily de-escalate tensions and influence other countries, making alliances in a difficult position to achieve its objective collectively. Analyzing China's actions through the lens of defense diplomacy reveals that while China's actions towards the security alliances in the region might be interpreted as a rejection of defense diplomacy's principles of trust-building and conflict prevention (Syawfi, 2009), however, China's economic and diplomatic initiatives towards other regional partners can be viewed as attempts to selectively engage in aspects of defense diplomacy, albeit in a manner that serves its own strategic interests. Although China's approach lacks the multilateral cooperation and commitment to shared security goals that are central to defense diplomacy as described by Sarjito and Perwita (2024), the emphasis on bilateral deals rather than collective security mechanisms undermines the trust-building and capacity enhancement aspects highlighted by Cottey and Forster (2004). China's actions, therefore, represent a selective and ultimately self-serving engagement with the principles of defense diplomacy, rather than a genuine commitment to its broader goals of conflict prevention and regional stability.

### **Preparation for Hybrid Warfare**

China's military power projection exemplifies hybrid warfare through its asymmetric tactics, particularly in the use of gray-zone strategies. The deployment of coastguard vessels and maritime militias to harass Philippine fishing boats demonstrates a blend of conventional military presence and irregular tactics. This approach allows China to assert territorial claims while maintaining plausible deniability, consistent with Hoffman's assertion that hybrid warfare involves the simultaneous use of diverse tactics (Hoffman, 2007). Additionally, the militarization of artificial islands with advanced weaponry enhances China's operational effectiveness and enables rapid responses to perceived threats, reflecting the integration of advanced weaponry and disruptive technologies in hybrid warfare (Ahluwalia, 2020). In the realm of diplomacy, China employs coercive strategies to fracture regional unity among Southeast Asian nations. By leveraging bilateral infrastructure loans and trade deals, China effectively weakens collective resistance. This divide-and-rule strategy creates dependencies that China can exploit for geopolitical gain. Furthermore, China's use of narrative propaganda

to frame adversarial alliances, such as QUAD and AUKUS, as threats to regional stability exemplifies its engagement in information warfare, a critical component of hybrid warfare (Hoffman, 2007). China's legal revisionism, particularly its rejection of the 2016 PCA ruling, underscores its strategic manipulation of international norms. By publishing "historical archives" to legitimize its claims in the South China Sea, China seeks to redefine maritime laws in its favor, engaging in the legal battlefield as part of its hybrid warfare strategy. This tactic reflects Hoffman's view that hybrid warfare encompasses multiple arenas, including legal frameworks (Hoffman, 2007). Finally, China's economic statecraft plays a pivotal role in its hybrid warfare approach. The provision of loans and investments in exchange for political concessions illustrates how economic incentives can be weaponized. Additionally, China's retaliatory sanctions against countries like Australia and Japan demonstrate its use of economic coercion to exert influence. By fostering economic dependencies, China complicates the responses of affected nations, weighing economic benefits against national security concerns.

### **Impact on Regional Security Stability**

China's military activities have created a pronounced imbalance in regional power dynamics, which escalated tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. The continuous incursions and the militarization of artificial islands contribute to an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability. As regional actors respond to China's assertiveness, there is a risk of miscalculation and conflict, particularly in contested maritime areas. This military buildup not only serves to assert China's dominance but also poses a direct threat to the sovereignty of smaller nations, particularly in contested maritime areas. Moreover, China's diplomatic maneuvers have effectively undermined regional unity, particularly within ASEAN. By leveraging economic incentives and bilateral agreements, China has successfully influenced member states to adopt positions that align with its interests, thereby fracturing collective resistance against its assertive actions. Thayer (2021) argues that ASEAN's inability to mediate this rivalry underscores its institutional fragility. While the Philippines advocate for a unified stance, Cambodia and Laos prioritize Chinese patronage, fragmenting regional responses. This strategy of divide-and-rule has stymied efforts to establish a cohesive regional response to security challenges, weakening the overall effectiveness of multilateral frameworks in addressing disputes. Meanwhile, China's rejection of international legal rulings and its efforts to redefine maritime norms pose significant challenges to established international law. In this regard, China signals its intent to operate outside the bounds of internationally recognized legal frameworks. This approach not only undermines the legitimacy of international dispute resolution mechanisms but also sets a concerning precedent for future maritime conflicts. Furthermore, China's use of economic statecraft as a tool for exerting influence has profound implications for regional security. This economic leverage not only facilitates China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea but also creates a climate of fear among regional actors, who may be reluctant to engage in security partnerships that could provoke Chinese retaliation. The intertwining of economic interests with security considerations complicates the regional landscape, making it difficult for states to navigate their relationships with both China and emerging security alliances.

### **CONCLUSION**

China's responses to emerging security alliances in the region, particularly the QUAD, AUKUS, JAPHUS, and SQUAD, underscore its determination to resist perceived containment through hybrid strategies that involve the simultaneous use of diverse tactics. This reflects a realist calculus: leveraging military, diplomatic, and economic tools to offset external pressures while avoiding direct conflict. While militarization and economic coercion heighten short-term risks, Beijing's selective engagement with crisis management mechanisms reveals a pragmatic

desire to avoid systemic conflict. China's militarization of artificial islands serves to assert dominance and deter adversaries, complicating the operational environment for regional powers. Despite these aggressive tactics that can provoke counter-reactions, leading to increased military cooperation among allies, Beijing's bilateral economic deals and crisis-management mechanisms temporarily de-escalate tensions. This dual approach complicates the ability of alliances to achieve collective objectives, as they navigate the challenges posed by China's influence. From a defense diplomacy perspective, China's actions can be interpreted as a rejection of the principles of trust-building and conflict prevention. However, while its assertive military posture undermines regional stability, China simultaneously engages in economic and diplomatic initiatives with other regional partners. This selective engagement can be viewed as an attempt to incorporate aspects of defense diplomacy, albeit in a manner that serves its strategic interests rather than fostering genuine cooperation. China's approach lacks the multilateral cooperation and commitment to shared security goals central to defense diplomacy. Instead, it emphasizes bilateral deals over collective security mechanisms, which undermines trust and capacity building efforts. This selective engagement reflects a self-serving interpretation of defense diplomacy principles, prioritizing China's national interests over broader regional stability. Furthermore, long-term regional stability hinges on two critical factors: the ability of democratic alliances to maintain unity amid Chinese economic pressure and the development of inclusive regional institutions that integrate China. To achieve sustainable security, revitalizing ASEAN centrality, finalizing a meaningful Code of Conduct, and establishing effective crisis communication channels between the US and China are essential. Through these initiatives, regional actors can work towards a more stable security framework that mitigates the risks associated with China's hybrid strategies while promoting long-term peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

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