

# NETWORK THINKING IN THE INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES (2017–2025)

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## ABSTRACT

*From 2017 to 2025, the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States underwent a continuous process of formation and implementation across three presidential terms belonging to two different parties. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining international relations theory with foreign policy analysis, together with policy document analysis, the historical-logical method and comparison, the study shows that network thinking has been transformed from an orientation set out in official documents into a mode of organizing forces, with three manifestations: cross-cutting linkages among U.S. allies, the formation of issue-specific minilateral mechanisms, and expansion from the field of security into the economic and technological fields. Network thinking is not a replacement of the objective of maintaining U.S. preeminence but an adjustment of the manner in which that objective is pursued under conditions of relatively declining resources; because it rests on situational convergence of interests rather than on binding legal commitments, the network structure is at once highly flexible and vulnerable to fluctuations in U.S. domestic politics. For Vietnam, steadfastly upholding the foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification is the basis for participating selectively in regional linkages without being drawn into the logic of bloc alignment.*

**Keyword:** network thinking; Indo-Pacific strategy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has become the key geostrategic space of world politics in the first decades of the twenty-first century. It is the region that concentrates the greater part of global economic and military potential and of the world's population, and it is at the same time the arena of a complex interweaving of cooperation and competition among major powers. In the National Security Strategy released in December 2017, the United States observed: “A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region” [20]. This observation marked the point at which the concept of the “Indo-Pacific” officially replaced the concept of the “Asia-Pacific”, entailing a series of adjustments in institutional organization, force posture and the mode of assembling forces on the part of this great power.

In the period 2017–2025, although three successive U.S. administrations differed considerably in domestic and foreign policy, one element was maintained throughout: the organization of allies and partners into a multi-tiered, multi-dimensional structure of linkages rather than into a system of separate bilateral relationships as before. The Indo-Pacific Strategy

released in February 2022 expressed this orientation in a single proposition: “We will pursue this through a latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions” [23]. In May 2025, the U.S. Secretary of Defense reaffirmed at the Shangri-La Dialogue: “A strong, resolute, and capable network of allies and partners is our key strategic advantage” [33]. This consistency at the level of thinking, notwithstanding discontinuities in specific policies, calls for a systematic explanation.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical basis for studying network structures in international relations was laid by the work of Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Miles Kahler and Alexander H. Montgomery published in the journal *International Organization* in 2009. The authors hold that networks should be understood in two senses: both as a method for analyzing the structure of relations among actors and as an actual form of organization lying between markets and hierarchies [11, p. 559]. The important contribution of this work is to show that an actor's position within the network – and not merely that actor's material capabilities – is an important source of power.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, in the work “The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World” published in 2017, developed this argument into a strategic framework. The author argues that foreign policy makers need simultaneously to see the world as a “chessboard” of competing states and as a “web” of transnational connections; the capacity to connect, and not only the capacity to coerce, becomes the strategic resource of the twenty-first century [18].

At the regional level, the study by Aries A. Arugay and Mico A. Galang published in the ISEAS Perspective series in 2024 analyzes the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement signed on July 8, 2024, as a typical case. The authors hold that this agreement does not replace but rather “complements and cements” the hub-and-spokes system, by allowing Japan to become “a genuine participant” in joint exercises that had previously been conducted only by the United States and the Philippines [1].

Among Vietnamese researchers, the article “U.S. foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region under President Joe Biden” by Dr. Nguyễn Văn Dương, published in the Political Theory Journal in 2024, systematized the pillars of U.S. policy, pointing out that the United States has strengthened its five treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines and Thailand while also promoting the Quad and the AUKUS mechanism [7]. The article by Dr. Đỗ Khương Mạnh Linh and Dr. Mạch Lê Thu on India’s position in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy adds an important perspective, pointing out that New Delhi “does not want the Quad to have a clearly defined collective security function or mutual assistance commitments” and operates “according to its own logic rather than being drawn into the orbit of other great powers” [13].

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

The article employs an interdisciplinary approach combining international relations theory with foreign policy analysis, in which network theory is applied as the principal analytical framework. Three specific research methods are used: the method of policy document analysis, applied to the system of official U.S. strategic documents in the period 2017–2025 in order to determine the evolution of its conceptual system and orientations; the historical-logical method, in

order to reconstruct the process by which network thinking took shape in chronological order and to draw out the internal logic governing that process; and the comparative method, in order to contrast the “hub-and-spokes” model of the Cold War period with the network structure.

## 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

### 4.1. *The formation of network thinking in the system of U.S. strategic documents*

Network thinking appeared in U.S. strategic documents through a process that can be clearly dated. The National Security Strategy of December 2017 set out the orientation: “We will seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India” [20]. This was the first time that a cooperative framework going beyond the traditional bilateral structure was recorded in a strategic document at the highest level.

The Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy gave concrete form to this orientation in the military dimension. The document states: “Mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are crucial to our strategy, providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match” [28]. More notably, the document for the first time used a term of a structural character: “We will strengthen our alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific into a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains” [28].

On May 30, 2018, the U.S. Pacific Command was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command, marking the institutionalization of the strategic conceptual adjustment within the military organizational apparatus. Subsequently, on June 1, 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, whose subtitle directly highlighted the network element: “Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region”. The report states: “The Department of Defense is strengthening and evolving U.S. alliances and partnerships into a networked security architecture to uphold the rules-based international order”, with the aim of “cultivating intra-Asian security relationships capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains” [29].

The document U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific (January 2021) shows that the

overarching objective of the United States is to maintain “diplomatic, economic, and military preeminence in the fastest-growing region”, while also setting the task of “working toward a quadrilateral security framework with India, Japan, Australia and the United States” [22].

The Indo-Pacific Strategy released in February 2022 provided the formula for network thinking. The document sets out five objectives, of which the second is to “build connections within and beyond the region”, and declares: “We will pursue this through a latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions” [23]. The document also affirms: “We support ASEAN centrality and support ASEAN in its efforts to deliver sustainable solutions to the region’s most pressing challenges” [23]. The 2022 National Defense Strategy, released on October 27, 2022, raised the position of the alliance network to the level of a centerpiece: “Mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are our greatest global strategic advantage – and they are central to this strategy” [30].

#### ***4.2. Building the nodes of the network: from bilateral alliances to minilateral mechanisms***

On the ground, network thinking has been realized through the establishment and upgrading of a series of cooperative mechanisms with a limited membership.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), comprising the United States, Japan, Australia and India, was revived at a senior officials’ meeting in Manila in November 2017, after nearly a decade of interruption. This mechanism was upgraded to the level of heads of state and government in 2021. The Wilmington Declaration of September 21, 2024, affirmed that the Quad is “more strategically aligned than ever before and is a force for good delivering real, positive, and enduring impact”, and stated clearly: “we continue to support the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and are committed to ensuring the Quad’s work is aligned with ASEAN’s principles and priorities” [25]. This summit announced two new initiatives, the Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission and the Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific [25].

On September 15, 2021, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia announced the establishment of AUKUS – “an enhanced trilateral security partnership”. The first initiative was to support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered

submarines through “an 18-month trilateral effort to identify the optimal pathway”; other initial areas of cooperation focused on “cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities” [21].

On June 24, 2022, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States announced the establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific mechanism, described as “a new initiative to more effectively and efficiently support Pacific Island priorities” [24].

On August 18, 2023, at Camp David, the leaders of the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea declared that they were “ushering in a new era of trilateral partnership”. The three countries committed to “hold trilateral meetings among leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers and national security advisors at least annually”, and to “consult with each other expeditiously in order to coordinate responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats affecting our collective interests and security”. The three countries also agreed to “conduct annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises on a regular basis” and to operate a mechanism for sharing missile warning data in real time [14].

In parallel with the minilateral mechanisms, the United States has expanded its presence through bilateral arrangements. On February 2, 2023, the United States and the Philippines announced the addition of four new sites under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, bringing the total to nine sites; the official statement read: “The expansion of EDCA will make our alliance stronger and more resilient, and will accelerate modernization of our combined military capabilities” [34]. In terms of linkages among U.S. allies themselves, Japan and the Philippines signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement on July 8, 2024 [1].

#### ***4.3. Expanding the network into the economic and technological fields***

In May 2022, the United States launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, bringing together 14 countries: Australia, Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States. This framework comprises four pillars: trade; supply chains; clean economy, decarbonization and infrastructure; and tax and anti-corruption. By

November 2023, the three pillars on supply chains, the clean economy and the fair economy had reached negotiated outcomes, among which the Supply Chain Agreement was assessed as “the world’s first multilateral supply chain agreement”; the trade pillar alone did not conclude negotiations, owing to disagreements over digital trade, cross-border data flows and data localization [15].

#### **4.4. Changes in the network during 2025**

On January 21, 2025, one day after the inauguration of the U.S. President, the foreign ministers of the Quad met in Washington. The joint statement reaffirmed the commitment to “a free and open Indo-Pacific, where the rule of law, democratic values, sovereignty, and territorial integrity are upheld and defended”, and stated clearly that the four countries “strongly oppose any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion” [32].

On May 31, 2025, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, the U.S. Secretary of Defense affirmed: “A strong, resolute, and capable network of allies and partners is our key strategic advantage”. In the same speech, he set out a requirement for allies: “We ask – and indeed, we insist – that our allies and partners do their part on defense”, with the argument: “When our allies share the burden, we can increase our focus on the Indo-Pacific, our priority theater” [33].

On July 1, 2025, the Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Washington announced “a new, ambitious, and robust agenda focused on four key areas: maritime and transnational security, economic prosperity and security, critical and emerging technology, and humanitarian assistance and emergency response”, including the Quad Critical Minerals Initiative. The statement affirmed: “Our cooperation with and support for ASEAN and its centrality and unity, the Pacific Islands Forum and Pacific-led regional groupings, as well as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, remains unchanged” [31].

However, 2025 also saw signs of waning momentum. The Quad leaders’ summit to be hosted by India was not held during 2025 [16]. The United States applied a reciprocal tariff policy to many partners in the region, with the tariff on India reaching as high as 50% [16]; for Vietnam, the reciprocal tariff rate was adjusted down to 20% under an executive order effective from

August 1, 2025 [3]. At the same time, the United States raised its defense spending requirement for regional allies from 3.5% to a level equivalent to the commitment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries, namely 5% of gross domestic product; Japan postponed a foreign and defense ministerial meeting scheduled for July 2025, Australia publicly rejected this demand, and the Pentagon undertook a review of the submarine arrangement under AUKUS [12].

### **5. DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1. The nature of network thinking: a transformation in the mode of maintaining preeminence**

The findings surveyed above confirm that network thinking in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is not mere discourse but a logic of organizing forces that has been consistently institutionalized throughout the period 2017–2025.

In the “hub-and-spokes” model that took shape in the 1950s, the United States was the sole center: allies were connected to the United States but hardly connected to one another. As Victor D. Cha has pointed out, this was a deliberate choice intended to secure for the United States the ability to control the behavior of the allies themselves [6]. By contrast, the contemporary network structure is characterized by a growth in horizontal linkages among actors that had previously been connected only to the center: Japan–Philippines, Japan–Republic of Korea, Japan–Australia. According to network theory, this increase in the density of linkages raises the resilience of the system as a whole, because the weakening of one node does not disrupt the entire structure.

Network thinking is not an abandonment of the objective of maintaining U.S. preeminence, but an adjustment of the manner in which that objective is pursued. The Strategic Framework document declassified in 2021 stated very clearly that the overarching objective is to maintain “diplomatic, economic, and military preeminence” in the region [22]. What has changed is not the end but the means: instead of bearing the entire cost of maintaining regional order out of its own resources, the United States has moved to distributing that cost across a broader set of partners. The statement by the head of the U.S. Department of Defense at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue – “When our allies share the burden, we can increase our focus on the Indo-Pacific” [33] –

expressed this logic directly. In substance, network thinking is a strategic response to the relative decline of American power compared with the unipolar period after the Cold War.

### ***5.2. The advantages and the intrinsic limits of the network structure***

The network structure affords the United States three advantages. The first is institutional flexibility: mechanisms such as the Quad, AUKUS or U.S.–Japan–Republic of Korea trilateral cooperation do not require ratification by the legislature in the way an alliance treaty does, and can therefore be established rapidly. The second is the capacity for a division of labor by issue: the fact that the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting of July 2025 identified four distinct focal areas [31] shows that each mechanism can be specialized for a particular set of tasks. The third is the capacity to attract actors that are unwilling to join a formal alliance, India being the prime example. However, the very features that create these advantages are also the source of intrinsic limits.

The first is the absence of binding legal obligations. As Tim Phan notes in an analysis of minilateralism, the commitments within these mechanisms “are usually voluntary and not legally binding” [26]. This means that the effectiveness of the network depends on a convergence of interests at each given moment, rather than resting on obligations guaranteed by international law. When the interests of members diverge, the network possesses no coercive mechanism to maintain cohesion.

The second is dependence on the continuity of U.S. domestic policy. This was the point most clearly exposed in 2025. The fact that the Quad leaders' summit to be hosted by India was not held [16], that the Pentagon reviewed the AUKUS submarine arrangement, that Australia publicly rejected the demand to raise defense spending to 5% of gross domestic product, and that Japan postponed a ministerial meeting [12] reveals one reality: when the central node adjusts its priorities, the entire network is immediately affected. In other words, the proposition that the network structure possesses high resilience holds only when the peripheral nodes have the capacity and the will to act autonomously; in the case of the Indo-Pacific, the excessive asymmetry of resources between the United States and its partners means that in

practice the network still retains a centripetal character.

The third is the contradiction between the security pillar and the economic pillar. While the security mechanisms have been continuously expanded, the economic pillar has proved less durable. The failure of the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to conclude negotiations [15] revealed the limits of U.S. internal capacity to supply economic public goods to the region. By 2025, when the reciprocal tariff policy was applied to the very partners within this framework – with the tariff on India reaching as high as 50% [16] – the contradiction between the logic of security and the logic of economics became overt. A network built on the basis of common interests can hardly maintain its appeal when the central node itself imposes measures that damage the economic interests of the member nodes.

### ***5.3. The impacts on Vietnam***

The expansion of the U.S. network of partners has created additional space for Vietnam to diversify its external relations. Vietnam joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework from the moment the framework was launched in 2022. On September 10, 2023, Vietnam–United States relations were upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for peace, cooperation and sustainable development, on the principle of “respect for the United Nations Charter, international law, and each other's political systems, independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity” [5]. The principle of respect for each other's political systems recorded in this document constitutes an important political and legal basis for the development of bilateral relations.

However, the greatest challenge for Vietnam lies not in direct pressure to make a choice, but in a structural effect: as the region is gradually organized along lines of linkage, the latitude for the balancing policy of small and medium-sized countries tends to narrow. The second challenge comes from the unpredictability of U.S. policy, manifested in the application of a reciprocal tariff of 20% on Vietnamese goods from August 1, 2025 [3]. This shows that economic relations with the United States, even within the framework of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, remain

subject to the effects of internal U.S. policy adjustments.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM

First, persist in the approach of selective participation according to each field of cooperation. The issue-based division of labor characteristic of the network structure creates latitude for Vietnam to take part in areas of cooperation that directly serve development interests – such as supply chains, the digital economy, the energy transition, disaster response and non-traditional maritime security – without taking part in areas of a military-alliance character. This approach is fully consistent with the “four no’s” defense policy [10] and with the position Vietnam has stated with respect to the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: cooperation must ensure that it is “open, inclusive and transparent, consistent with international law and with ASEAN centrality, and complementary to existing economic linkages” [4].

Second, treat the consolidation of ASEAN’s centrality and unity as a strategic priority. Practice shows that the most effective way to protect the autonomous space of small and medium-sized countries is not to oppose minilateral mechanisms, but to raise the capacity and the substantive effectiveness of ASEAN-led institutions, so that these institutions continue to be the irreplaceable venue for handling the region’s security and development issues. Promoting the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific [2] needs to be identified as a focus of work.

Third, enhance the capacity for economic self-reliance and self-strengthening in order to reduce vulnerability to sudden policy adjustments by major partners. The course of the reciprocal tariff policy in 2025 [3] is practical evidence that a high degree of dependence on a single export market can be transformed into strategic risk. Diversifying markets, raising the technological content and domestic value added of export products, and taking an active part in multi-tiered economic linkages are directions that need to be promoted.

Fourth, strengthen research and strategic forecasting work. The unpredictability in the policies of major powers in the present period requires raising the quality of research and forecasting in order to provide timely advice to

the Party and the State. In this regard, particular attention needs to be paid to monitoring the indicators of adjustments in the strategic conceptions of major powers, such as the U.S. renaming of the Indo-Pacific Command back to the Pacific Command in June 2026 [17].

## 7. CONCLUSION

First, network thinking is a logic of organizing forces that runs throughout the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and has been consistently institutionalized across three presidential terms belonging to two parties. From the orientation toward a “networked security architecture” in the 2018 National Defense Strategy [28], to the formula of a “latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions” in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy [23], and to the affirmation of a “network of allies and partners” in 2025 [33], a continuous line of development in strategic thinking can be discerned. In substance, this is a transformation in the mode by which the United States maintains its preeminence under conditions of relatively declining resources, and not a change in strategic objectives.

Second, the network structure contains intrinsic limits of a systemic character. Because it rests on a situational convergence of interests rather than on binding legal obligations, the effectiveness of the network depends heavily on the continuity of the central node’s policy. The developments of 2025 – from the failure to hold the Quad leaders’ summit, to allies’ reactions against the demand for increased defense spending, to the contradiction between security commitments and reciprocal tariff policy – have demonstrated this vulnerability with particular clarity.

Third, for Southeast Asia, the principal challenge lies not in the pressure to choose among major powers, but in the risk that the center of gravity of security issues shifts away from inclusive multilateral institutions. In that context, Vietnam’s steadfast adherence to a foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification [8], [9] – not choosing sides but choosing what is right, choosing fairness, justice and national interests – together with its persistent prioritization of consolidating ASEAN’s centrality, is a choice consistent with national interests and with the trend of peace, cooperation and development of the times.

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