

Evolving U.S. Pacific Security Framework

Benjamin Blandin

Abstract

This article traces the evolution of U.S. grand strategy in the Pacific from the early days of the 18th century to the present time, highlighting four major phases: initial expansion (1820–1941), wartime ascendancy and Cold War predominance (1941–1973), post-Vietnam retrenchment (1973–2009), and the renewed pivot to Asia (since 2009). It argues that while the United States entered the Pacific belatedly compared to European powers, it progressively secured a lasting presence through territorial acquisitions, military expeditions, and the establishment of forward bases. The Second World War and subsequent conflicts in Korea and Vietnam consolidated America's role as a Pacific power, underpinned by alliances and global liberal internationalism. The post-Vietnam era saw a relative decline in military engagement, but continued intelligence, technological, and economic influence. Since 2009, U.S. policy has shifted again, emphasizing flexible force posture, enhanced partnerships, and multilateral initiatives in response to China's growing assertiveness. The analysis concludes that America's enduring legitimacy as a Pacific nation now faces unprecedented challenges from industrial, technological, and strategic constraints, requiring deeper reliance on allies to sustain its regional leadership

From its creation up to the current era, the United States has adopted different approaches to the concept of Grand Strategy, including isolationism (with elements of expansionism), liberal internationalism, containment, strategic retrenchment and the War on Terror.

This article aims at describing this succession of strategic evolutions and how it influenced U.S. policies and shaped the country's involvement in the Pacific through five successive time periods, covering the early days of the American presence (1820–1941), from the Pacific campaign to the Vietnam War (1941–1973), the post-Vietnam War era (1973–2009), and the pivot (from 2009).

From 1820 to present, a history of American engagement in the Pacific Ocean

Created in 1776 and finally independent in 1783, the United States of America were all but destined to be a Pacific power if we consider the initial limits of the 13 colonies, but these borders were to experience a considerable change in a short period of time. Indeed, starting from their proclamation of independence, the U.S. have grown through a succession of land cessions, conflicts and annexations, including the French cession of Louisiana in 1803, the British cessions of 1818 and 1842 (northern border settlement), and 1846 (Oregon), the Spanish cessions of 1813 and 1819 (Florida), the annexation of Texas (1845), the Mexican cessions of 1848 (New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada & California) following the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 and the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. All in all, the size of the continental United States has grown almost tenfold, from 1,1 million km² to 8 million km², not even counting for Alaska that was later acquired from Russia in 1863.

In the wake of the “Manifest Destiny”, the United States entered an active phase of expansionism and interventionism, transforming from an Atlantic Ocean, European-centric

country to one that covers three oceans (and the Gulf of Mexico) and the greatest part of an entire continent with economic, diplomatic and military interests in Asia and the South Pacific. This evolution that we could label using a renowned Chinese classic “Journey to the West” was not without consequences.

A late and progressive arrival in the Pacific (1820–1941)

Being present in the Pacific Ocean since at least 1784 for trade and whaling activities, the United States was the last Western power to gain access to and to explore the Pacific Ocean, about three hundred years after the expedition of the Spanish explorer Magellan, and a flurry of other expeditions initiated by Spain, Portugal, France and the United Kingdom, with a first state-sponsored presence made up by the Pacific Squadron (1820-1910). Even though this initiative was a humble beginning, with a limited number of boats all along its lifetime, it was not to last for too long and the United States indeed followed suit with a series of naval expeditions. Some of these were shaped by both commercial and scientific concerns, like the Wilkes Expedition (1838), the USS Albatross Expedition (1886) and the Tanager Expedition (1923). Others were driven by a desire to expand American influence and interests in the Pacific Ocean - later coined as “gunboat diplomacy” - such as the Perry Expeditions to Japan (1852), the intervention in the second Opium War in China (1857), the Formosa Expedition (1867), the “Korean Expedition” to Joseon (1871) and the China Relief Expedition (1898) during the Boxer rebellion. During that time, the United States also established the Yangtze River Patrol Force (1854–1949) and the U.S. Asiatic Fleet (1902–1942) to protect American interests in China and the Pacific.

Despite a national strategy of isolationism, these expeditions have indeed allowed the United States to make a place for itself – politically at least – among the great powers of that era, notably through the signing of unequal treaties with China¹, Japan² and Joseon³. These treaties expanded the reach of American business interests and were accompanied by a growing presence of American citizens, especially in China, following the establishment of the American Concession in Shanghai (1848–1863), including military personnel, diplomats and a significant number of missionaries who opened charitable institutions such as hospitals, places of worship and schools.

Encouraged by a state sponsored imperial policy, the American presence then transformed from occasional to permanent through a particular piece of legislation, the Guano Act of 1856, an act that authorized the United States to claim all uninhabited islands on which guano was found on the sole basis of a declaration by any citizen of the United States. In all, fifty-six islands were claimed, the vast majority in the Pacific Ocean, and partially occupied, notably Howland Island, Baker Atoll, Johnston Atoll, Jarvis Island, Kingman Reef, Midway, Northern Mariana, Guam, Wake Island, Palmyra Atoll, and the American Samoa between 1856 and 1900. An “*a posteriori*” legitimization that was to serve again with the illegal annexation of Hawaii following the Newlands Resolution of 1898, and the “*de facto*” occupation of the Philippines, Guam and the Northern Mariana after the Spanish-American War of 1898.

A little less than two decades later, in 1914, another event was to transform the United States’ approach to the Pacific Ocean, when the Panama Canal, connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, was finally inaugurated after having been initiated in 1880 by the French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps. This canal, measuring 80 km, not only allowed ships to cut time by half for a New York to San Francisco Journey, paving the way for an increased American commercial and military presence, but also reflected the increasing importance of the Pacific in U.S. foreign policy.

¹ Treaty of Wanghia of 1844, Treaty of Tientsin of 1858, Boxer protocol of 1901

² Treaty of Kanagawa of 1854, “Harris Treaty” of 1858

³ Joseon–United States Treaty of 1882

This growing American presence and influence coincided with an emerging power in Asia, Japan, and its aggressive and expansionist strategy. This strategy started with the formal annexation of the Bonin islands in 1876 and that of the Ryu Kyu in 1879 and was followed by a succession of military successes, even though costly, against the Qing empire in 1895 and the Russian empire in 1905, both at land and at sea. Both victories allowed Japan to annex or occupy Joseon, Taiwan, the Pescadores and the Liaodong Peninsula. During World War I again, Japan expanded its territory through occupation under a mandate of the League of Nations or “South Seas Mandate” (1920) of the German Pacific territories and the Shandong peninsula.

After this last conflict, the Washington Naval Treaty (1922) limited naval arms race in the Pacific but also solidified the U.S.’s position as a leading Pacific power. Only a decade later Japan resumed its attacks against China with the Mukden incident and the ensuing occupation of Manchuria, which marked the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War. From there, the tensions only kept growing between the United States and Japan as the later engaged in continued attacks, from the Marco Polo bridge incident and the invasion of China to the USS Panay incident and the Nanjing Massacre, all of which happened in 1937. These last tragic events led to the adoption by the United States of economic sanctions in 1940 and again in 1941, effectively halting trade and impacting the Japanese defense industry and military capabilities. Fortunately, faced with the Japanese threat, the United States had taken advantage of the 1920s and 1930s to build and develop a string of military installations such as naval and air bases, to protect their territories, including Naval Station Pearl Harbor in Hawaii or Clark Airbase in the Philippines. Some ventures were more exotic such as the establishment of the American Equatorial Islands Colonization Project (1935–1942) on Jarvis Island, Howland islands and Baker Atoll (later expanded to Canton Island and Enderbury island), with the purpose of building weather stations and landing fields that could serve military and commercial purposes on air routes between Western Australia and California.

In just about fifty years, from the Perry expedition to the Spanish-American War, and the pre-World War II, the United States had moved from a near absent power to a major “*de facto*” resident power in the Pacific Ocean, controlling a great number of territories. The conflict to come was to become its ultimate test of resolve and demonstrate its attachment to this newfound role in the Pacific.

From the Pacific campaign to the Vietnam War, a ubiquitous power? (1941–1973)

Shocked by Japan’s surprise attack at Pearl Harbor Naval Base on December 7th, 1941, the United States quickly activated their massive industrial capabilities and developed their military arsenal in record time. Already raised before the war from 334.000 men in 1939 to 1,8 million in 1941, the armed forces of the United States rose to 12 million men by 1945, including 4,2 million in the Navy and 660.000 in the Marine Corps. The number of tanks, planes, pieces of artillery and vessels experienced an equally formidable increase, the Navy in particular, growing from 790 vessels in 1941, including seven aircraft carriers, to nearly 6800 vessels, including thirty-four aircraft carriers, in 1945.

Despite a series of rapid offensives by the Japanese Imperial Army in 1942, which stretched from the Chinese hinterland to Papua New Guinea in the south, and from the Aleutian Islands in the northeast to Burma and India in the west, the United States stood firm. Taking leadership of the Allied forces, including Great Britain, Australia, and the Netherlands, the U.S. launched the Doolittle Raid, waged a devastating submarine campaign, and secured crucial victories in key naval, air, and ground battles at Midway, Guadalcanal, and the Coral Sea. Additionally, the U.S. provided vital Lend-Lease aid to its allies, including Australia, New Zealand, China, the Soviet Union, and the Netherlands, further strengthening the global resistance against Japan.

Between 1943 and 1945, the United States achieved capital successes with their “Island hopping campaign”, progressively taking control of the Pacific Islands (Tarawa, Saipan, Kwajalein, Guam, Peleliu, Tinian) and Papua New Guinea, retaking the Philippines, expelling the Japanese forces from Borneo and launching a massive landing in Okinawa. In 1945, the world saw the first use of a new weapon with the release of a uranium bomb (“Little Boy”) on Hiroshima, and a plutonium bomb (“Fat Man”) on Nagasaki, both leading Japan to recognize its defeat and to sign its capitulation onboard the USS Missouri. The end of World War II and the use of the atom as a weapon, quickly followed by the USSR, led the U.S. to establish the Pacific Nuclear Test Site or “Pacific Proving Grounds” in the Marshall Islands that detonated a total of 105 nuclear tests between 1946 and 1962 over a series of campaigns, including Operations Crossroads, Sandstone, Greenhouse, Ivy, Castle, Redwing, Hardtack I and Dominic I and II.

Despite major victories over the axis power in both Asia and Europe, the United States was not to rest for long and soon found itself supporting France in its colonial war in Indochina (1946–1954) while leading the United Nations forces in their first campaign to protect South Korea from an invasion by its northern neighbour, retreating at first under the chock of a massive attack, all the way to Busan. It then quickly brought reinforcements and established absolute air superiority, in addition to launching a surprise landing in Incheon, cutting North Korean supplies and making it possible to launch a major counterattack that took UN forces all the way to the border between North Korea and China. The ensuing massive Chinese offensive resulted in a controlled retreat that ultimately ended up with the fixation of the armistice line on the 38th parallel, a “demilitarized zone,” in fact the most heavily armed area in the world.

Less than a year after the end of the Korean War, the United States started deploying military advisors to the government of South Vietnam, but it only started involving itself in 1965. From there, the American military presence grew over the years, reaching a pic of 500.000 men in 1968, in addition to which other countries contributed such as South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines and Taiwan. In Vietnam, the United States again attempted to use the techniques that had proven so successful in the previous two conflicts: establishing near total air superiority, using the latest weapon systems of their arsenal, including the B-52 bombers, the F-4 and F-5 jet fighters, the ubiquitous Chinook and UH-1 Iroquois helicopters, and the M-109 self-propelled howitzers, and an unrestricted use of standard and chemical (orange agent) bombings in Vietnam as well as in Laos and Cambodia. But despite these advantages, the war did not progress in their favour and by 1973 the United States left South Vietnam who ultimately fell to the North in 1975, leading to a reunification of the country.

In total, over these three conflicts, the United States’ involvement led to 866,000 casualties, including 206,000 dead and 660,000 wounded, not accounting for equipment loss and overall cost of the war, but it positioned them as the first ever super-power, either in economic, diplomatic, military and influence terms as well as the first nuclear power, one of the key founders of the United Nations, and a major actor when not the winner of three consecutive major conflicts of the 20th century (for a total of six major conflicts in the 20th century, including the first world war, the Gulf War and the Balkans War) on top of becoming a major global security provider for the region through a series of mutual defense treaties with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS treaty, 1951), the Philippines (1951), South Korea (1953), Southeast Asia (SATO Treaty, 1954), Taiwan (1955) and Japan (1960).

This strategy of liberal internationalism, meant at maintaining U.S. political predominance through the creation and maintenance of an extensive network of allies (exemplified by NATO and bilateral or multilateral alliances) and the integration of other states into U.S.-designed international institutions (such as the IMF, WTO/GATT, and World Bank); This strategy also included the creation of a network of military bases all over the world and the deployment of hundreds of thousands of soldiers as well as military equipment and weapon systems overseas,

whether in Asia, the Middle East, Central and Latin America and Europe, especially in the framework of its containment strategy of communist countries.

The post-Vietnam War era, a reduced presence in the Pacific amid global refocus toward the Middle East? (1973–2009)

Following the end of the American engagement in the Vietnam war in 1973, and led by increasing tension in the Middle East, the United States armed forces massively disengaged from the Pacific theatre in a concerted effort to refocus their attention to the Persian Gulf area, following a series of conflicts including the various stages of the Arab–Israeli conflict (since 1948), the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and later the first and second Gulf wars (1990–1991 & 2003) and the war in Afghanistan (2001–2021). Also, the impact of the first and second oil crisis that took place in 1973 and 1979, should not be ignored, especially at a time of growing dependency in the United States toward oil and gas imports from the Middle East. This increased focus toward the Middle East led to an equal increase in the U.S. military presence in the area that included opening and/or negotiating access to military bases in Bahrain, Oman, Diego Garcia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar between 1971 and 2001.

During that period of shifting attention from one theatre to another, the Pacific seemed to have lost its importance to the United States, but it was only true in military terms. Even though they significantly reduced their military footprint, with a reduction of troops and the closing of bases, both the American government and its armed forces still maintained a significant presence, for a variety of purposes. This ranged from Soviet submarines hunting, the installation of early warning radars and mid-course missiles interception, intelligence gathering, space and ballistic programs as well as the War on Terror post-09/11 and the containment strategy against the spread of communism. The first and most noticeable element of that list is undoubtedly military disengagement. This process began after the end of World War II, was temporarily halted during the Korean War and again during the Vietnam War but resumed immediately afterward.

In Japan, U.S. troops, which had amounted to 300,000 after World War II, decreased to 150,000 after 1952 and kept decreasing steadily until they stabilized around 50,000 after the retrocession of Okinawa in 1972. In South Korea, the number of U.S. troops also passed from 325,000 in 1953 to around 40,000 in 1970 and 28,500 after 2000. In Taiwan, about 1000 American “advisors” left the country in 1979, after the PRC was recognized as the legal government of China. In different countries and territories, U.S. military bases closed, were decommissioned or relocated: Itazuke Air Base in Japan (1979), Clark Air Base and Subic Bay in the Philippines (in 1991 and 1992), Midway Atoll (1993), Naval Air Station Agana in Guam (1995), Johnston Atoll (2004).

Started in 1947, the Cold War was at its height in the 1970s and 1980s, and the competition between USSR and the United States was very much alive in the domain of submarine warfare. With a seemingly ever-growing presence of Soviet SSNs and SSBNs and the constant threat of possible submarine-launched ICBMs against North America, the United States permanently assigned 60–70% of its submarine force to the Pacific Fleet. In practical terms, it meant that approximately 40 SSNs and 20 SSBNs were deployed at either Pearl Harbor, Guam and Bangor. In addition to the deployment of naval assets, the United States expanded the “Sound Surveillance System” or SOSUS, a network of undersea passive acoustic radar initially designed in the 1950s to detect Soviet submarines in both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans.

As part of their space, ballistic and anti-ballistic programs, the United States established a number of installations at various locations in the Pacific Ocean, but the Kwajalein Atoll, from the 1960s until today, had the particularity to concentrate all three dimensions between the islands of Kwajalein, with the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, Meck, for a Nike Zeus optical satellite tracking system, and various anti-ballistic missile programs such as Nike-X, Strategic Defense Initiative and the THAAD, and Roi Namur, with a ARPA Long-Range Tracking

And Instrumentation Radar (ALTAIR). The Kwajalein Atoll comprised several core elements including tracking radars, stationary and mobile telemetry, optical recording equipment and a secured optic Fiber data network via the HANTRU-1 undersea cable. The Reagan Test Site also served as a tracking station for crewed space flight and NASA research projects. In addition to these government activities, it should be noted that Space X has also been using Omelek Island as an early test launch site.

This period was also the opportunity for the United States to develop, automatize and standardize intelligence gathering with their allies in the Pacific region, which led to the creation of the five eyes intelligence sharing alliance and the Echelon program, particularly well-known due the Pine Gap site in Australia. But the five eyes alliance involves other countries other than just Australia and the United States, including New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, and the U.S. also share intelligence with its QUAD and QUAD+ allies, namely India, Japan and South Korea. This data gathering and sharing does not only transit through satellites but mostly via secured subsea cables, such as the PAC connecting Hawaii, Guam, and Okinawa, and the SSCS connecting Kwajalein Atoll, Guam, and Diego Garcia.

Less known, but very much active, was the War on Terror that followed the 09/11 terrorist attack in the United States. Even though it did not lead the United States in any direct conflict in the Pacific, it still led to an active engagement in support of allies and partners confronted to violent separatist and terrorist movements such as the MILF at the border between Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. As such, the United States has provided these countries with light weapons, training and various kinds of equipment, including – as part of the “Coast Watch South” project – the donation of dozens of naval radars to cover the Sulu and Celebes seas.

The pivot, a return of the United States? (from 2009)

Despite a global strategy of “strategic retrenchment”, also known as “Obama doctrine”, seen in the departure from Iraq and the progressive withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Obama administration initiated in 2009, in reaction to a growing China's assertiveness in its near seas and in Asia Pacific, the strategy of a U.S. pivot, or at least that officialised the necessity of an increased engagement, toward Asia (to compare with the previous neocons' strategy of a “Greater Middle East”). This strategy was made clear with Secretary Clinton's article in Foreign Policy titled “America's Pacific Century” and it officialised over President Obama's speech in Australia in 2011. Among its core elements, three played a crucial role in reshaping the relationship and cooperation between the United States and its allies and partners: the transformation of the U.S. military presence in the region, its expanding involvement across the Pacific, and significant investments in defense infrastructure throughout the area.

Diplomacy, in particular, held an important part, notably with ASEAN, the QUAD and the Pacific Island Nations. First with ASEAN, whom the United States became the very first dialogue Partner in 1977 and began participating in the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1993, this relation expanded in 2009 via the establishment of a Permanent Mission to ASEAN, then in 2015 with the establishment of the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership and in 2022 with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy reaffirming ASEAN's centrality to U.S. policy. Concerning the QUAD, this initially informal grouping comprising the United States, Japan, India and Australia was established in 2007 and then revived in 2017 as a response to shifting dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and China's action toward Taiwan and in the South China Sea. Initially limited in terms of scope, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue progressively expanded to a variety of domains such as infrastructure, climate change and cybersecurity. It also evolved into the QUAD+ format to include additional partner nations: South Korea, New Zealand, Vietnam, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, France and the European Union, some also contributing to the Five Eyes, and AUKUS.

With the Pacific Island nations too, the United States engaged itself by contributing to a number of regional-level groupings and organisations such as the Blue Dot Network, the Pacific Island Community, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Polynesian Leaders Group, the Pacific Islands Forum, the Partners in the Blue Pacific and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. More practically, the United States established diplomatic relations with Niue and the Cook Islands in 2023, reopened its embassy in the Solomon Islands the same year, opened two embassies in Tonga and Vanuatu, and is considering options to improve its representations in Kiribati, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Beyond the signature of agreements and its diplomatic presence, the U.S. influence in the region was also greatly improved by the return or the expansion of the activities of two organisations: USAID (later dissolved in 2025), all over the Pacific, and the Peace Corps, currently present in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.

In terms of defense and maritime security cooperation, the United States has signed agreements covering various domains with its partners in the region: Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, Fisheries law enforcement Agreement, Defense and Maritime Cooperation Agreement, General Security of Military Information Agreement, Maritime Law Enforcement Agreement, Military Use and Operating Rights Agreement, Shiprider Agreement and Status-of-Forces Agreement. These agreements are part of the new U.S. strategy of a wide but light and flexible military footprint that allow the country to be fully engaged in the entire Pacific while not maintaining a costly and growingly unpopular military presence, like in the case of Okinawa, while empowering its allies and partners.

Still, this does not mean that U.S. forces have disappeared from the Pacific as they retain access to numerous military bases across the region. This presence can be naturally found through its own bases along the American coastline and in Hawaii and Guam, but also at partner countries such as Australia⁴, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines⁵ and Singapore⁶ (a members of the FPDA⁷). More recently, the United States has partnered with a new set of countries including Palau, Micronesia⁸ and Papua New Guinea⁹ for the reopening of WWII sites (Peleliu, Lombrum) and the building of over-the-horizon radars. From these bases, the U.S. deploys forces and assets on a rotational basis to replenish, repair, train and deploy. A good example being the deployment over the South China Sea of P8 Poseidon surveillance planes and drones from Guam, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea and that of B52-H bombers from Roesmin Nurjadin Air Base in Indonesia.

Over the past two decades, U.S. actions in the Pacific have grown significantly, with an increase in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) both at sea and in the air, as well as Taiwan Strait transits, innocent passages, and port calls. In addition, U.S. forces have strengthened their relationships with allies and partners through enhanced cooperation, including 2+2 meetings, the exchange of officers for training, joint patrols, and a wide range of military exercises—spanning ground, naval, air, cyber, and general staff operations. These exercises, which occur at various levels (bilateral and multilateral) number up to seventy per year.

Finally, the U.S. is also acting as a net security provider through donations of new and

⁴ RAAF Bases Darwin and Tindal, Robertson Barracks, HMAS Stirling

⁵ The U.S. Armed Forces have access to EDCA+ sites: Antonio Bautista Air Base, Basa Air Base, Fort Magsaysay, Lumbia Airfield, Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base, Camilo Osias Naval Base, Lal-lo Airport, Camp Melchor Dela Cruz and Balabac Island

⁶ The U.S. Armed Forces have access to Changi Naval Base as well as Paya Lebar and Tengah Air Bases

⁷ Five Powers Defense Arrangements: series of bilateral defense agreements between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom

⁸ The U.S. is building over-the-horizon radars at Yap, Falalop and Fais Islands

⁹ Lombrum port, Port Moresby, Lae and Momote airports

decommissioned equipment. To name a few examples we could talk about the delivery to the Philippines of a National Coast Watch Center in 2015, the donation of Scan Eagle drones and decommissioned cutters and patrol boats to several ASEAN countries under the Maritime Security Initiative.

CONCLUSION

These four different periods of time of the American presence in the Pacific Ocean, from the modest early days of American exploration in the early 19th century, to ubiquitous power, followed by a relative disengagement, and lastly the pivot to Asia, demonstrate a continuous presence and interest for the area. Whether it acts through diplomacy, economy, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief or military and security means, the influence of the United States in the Pacific Ocean is of major proportion. After experiencing different stages, from expansionism, to isolationism, liberal internationalism, the War on Terror and the pivot to Asia, the United States' Grand Strategy has evolved in very different ways before reaching the current strategy, made of a lighter, more flexible footprint, that contributes to making it more appreciated and accepted by the public opinions.

The American presence in the Pacific has been enduring for two centuries, and the United States holds a strong claim to legitimacy in the region as a Pacific Ocean nation itself. The U.S. coastline along the Pacific stretches nearly 2,000 kilometers, encompassing three states—California, Oregon, and Washington—as well as the states of Hawaii and Alaska. Additionally, the U.S. has numerous territories scattered across the Pacific, including the unincorporated and unorganized Palmyra Atoll, the unincorporated and organized Northern Mariana Islands (with commonwealth status) and Guam (without commonwealth status), and a range of unincorporated, unorganized territories such as Howland Island, Baker Atoll, Johnston Atoll, Jarvis Island, Kingman Reef, Midway, Wake Island, and American Samoa. Furthermore, countries such as the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau are affiliated with the U.S. through Compacts of Free Association. In total these territories represent a global population of fifty-three million people, one-sixth of the overall American population.

Challenges to the American presence are being felt in a more and more acute fashion as China is increasing its assertiveness in its near seas, from the South China Sea to the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South Pacific, but even though the Chinese navy has grown to four hundred vessels, the U.S. Navy still beats it 2:1 in terms of tonnage and has established a network of facilities to which it could disperse its assets in terms of direct, high intensity, conflict. In addition, the United States has also developed a network of partnerships and mutual defense treaties with like-minded countries, through initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative, the QUAD and QUAD+. Nonetheless, tensions and disputes are escalating, while the U.S. fleet is aging, and the Chinese fleet continues to modernize and expand. At the same time, American defense-industrial capabilities are facing significant challenges, reaching an all-time low. This situation threatens to undermine the effectiveness of the AUKUS deal.

It now remains to be seen how the United States will be able to rely more on their allies and partners or to evolve their Indo-Pacific strategy in a direction that allows to fix the industrial, technical and technological flaws that have plagued its capacities and to maintain a lasting and effective deterrence toward China's Grand Strategy.