

Strategies under Constraint: China's Rise, Regional Responses, and the Strategic-Relational Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific

To understand how state structures are strategically selective, privileging certain strategies while constraining others; and how agents navigate these contexts to maximize their power and interests, the **Strategic-Relational Approach** (SRA), developed by Bob Jessop (2008), provides a critical political economy framework. SRA rejects the view of the state as a neutral or monolithic actor, instead conceptualizing it as a strategically selective field. SRA emphasizes the interplay between *structural contexts* (*constraints, institutional legacies, and systemic pressures*) and *strategic agency* (*actors' choices and maneuvers*). Structures are not equally open to all strategies; they privilege some while constraining others. At the same time, institutional state agents develop strategies within these selective contexts to pursue their goals. Outcomes, therefore, result from the dialectical interaction between structural selectivity and strategic agency. Instead of viewing structures as determining outcomes or agency as unbounded, SRA looks into how actors develop strategies in relation to opportunities and constraints embedded in structures.

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged gradually as scholars, policymakers, and strategists sought to capture the growing interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans in global trade, energy routes, and security dynamics (Medcalf, 2020; Das, 2019). Historically, colonial encounters shaped institutions and alignments across this region. Postcolonial states have since developed varied capacities and strategies to navigate between great powers. The current Indo-Pacific framework emphasizes maritime connectivity, strategic chokepoints, and the presence of multiple middle powers such as India, Japan, and Australia, alongside the rivalry between the United States (US) and China. While the rise of China has transformed the Indo-Pacific region into the most dynamic and contested region of global politics, the ways in which states experience, interpret, and respond to Beijing's influence vary significantly, producing a diverse set of outcomes. As one of the most important geopolitical arenas, the region is now characterized by the rise of China as a central structuring force, the resilience and adaptive strategies of Taiwan, and the hedging behavior of regional actors such as Vietnam and India. The Indo-Pacific region, therefore, embodies the dynamics

of strategic selectivity: China's economic power and geopolitical assertiveness privilege certain alignments, but they also generate counter-strategies and new coalitions.

The global ascent of China, Taiwan's democratic trajectory, and the shifting alignments of regional actors illustrate a dynamic political economy shaped by both structural forces and agency-driven strategies. To capture this interplay, the first issue of the Volume 11 (2025) of the *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal* (CCPS) features three articles that explore how the Indo-Pacific order is continuously reshaped by the dialectic of structural selectivity and strategic agency, underscoring the relevance of SRA for understanding political economy and strategic relations in Asia.

By conceptualizing the state and international order as strategically selective fields, the SRA provides an invaluable lens for interpreting how structural conditions and agent choices interact across these three studies. This approach is especially relevant for the Indo-Pacific, where structural constraints (*China's dominance, Taiwan's diplomatic isolation, economic dependency patterns*) and strategic agency (*Taiwan's democratization, Vietnam's hedging, India-Taiwan HADR cooperation*) continuously interact. By placing these articles within the SRA framework, we see them not as isolated individual scholarly works but as interlocking illustrations of how relational outcomes have emerged in the region. Specifically, offering the following key insights to strategic relational dynamics in the Indo-Pacific:

1. Historical legacies shape present structures;
2. China's rise is structurally powerful but relationally contested;
3. Agency under constraint yields creative strategies; and
4. The Indo-Pacific is a layered strategic field, where structures (*China's power*), relations (*ASEAN hedging, India-Taiwan cooperation*), and agents (*Xi, Taiwan's democratizers*) interact.

Samuel Jung's study provides a long-term institutional and agent-centered explanation for why Taiwan and the PRC, although both are culturally related societies shaped by imperialism, took fundamentally different political trajectories.

The central argument is that imperial legacies and political agents' choices created path-dependent developments. Taiwan, under Japanese rule from 1895

to 1945, inherited relatively efficient state institutions and modern bureaucracies. Despite colonial exploitation, these institutions provided a foundation for later adaptation. Political agents in Taiwan eventually shifted from authoritarian consolidation toward pragmatic liberalization, culminating in democratization. By contrast, the PRC experienced a century of extractive Western imperialism that eroded institutions and fostered deep resentment. Communist leaders chose ideology-driven strategies of power retention, reinforcing authoritarian path dependence.

From an SRA perspective, Taiwan and the PRC represent different structural legacies (institutional inheritances from imperialism) and strategic choices (pragmatism versus ideology) that created distinct relational positions in the international system.

Building on this divergence, Tran Xuan Hiep, Nguyen Tang Nghi, and Nguyen Cam Tu analyze China's contemporary strategy of external projection: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the *international level*, BRI responds to systemic shifts: the US "Pivot to Asia" (Clinton, 2011), the 2008 financial crisis (Dreher et al., 2022), and multipolarity. At the *national level*, BRI addresses domestic imperatives: balancing development, exporting industrial overcapacity, securing energy, and internationalizing the renminbi. At the *individual level*, Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" provides ideological impetus.

Yet challenges are significant. ASEAN states express concerns over debt traps, sovereignty, and negative experiences with Chinese contractors. Surveys reveal widespread distrust of China, with Vietnam among the most cautious. Thus, BRI illustrates China's ability to reshape structural contexts but also the strategic agency of Southeast Asian states, which adaptively hedge, resist, or embrace projects.

Gregory Coutaz's paper turns to India and Taiwan. Two democracies sharing vulnerabilities vis-à-vis China. Despite limited formal ties, both India and Taiwan face recurring natural disasters and rely on their militaries for disaster response. Coutaz argues that Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) provides a low-politics, non-threatening entry point for bilateral cooperation. India leverages multilateral mechanisms like IORA, BIMSTEC, and the Quad, while Taiwan uses the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) as a diplomatic workaround.

HADR thus enables India and Taiwan to:

- Build trust incrementally,

- Enhance soft power,
- Develop interoperability without openly provoking China.

From the SRA's lens, this represents strategic maneuvering within structural constraints: both India and Taiwan craft relational strategies in spaces where China's influence is limited.

The [CCPS Volume 11 \(2025\) Issue 1](#) highlights SRA's temporality, showing how past structures shape present dynamics. Thus, it starts with Samuel Jung's [Divergent Paths: Imperial Legacies, Strategic Agency, and the Divergence of Democracy in Taiwan and Authoritarianism in the PRC](#) (*historical foundations*) to Tran Xuan Hiep, Nguyen Tang Nghi, and Nguyen Cam Tu's [China's Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia: Vietnam's Strategic Responses and Regional Implications](#) (*contemporary structural contestation*), to Gregory Coutaz's [Balancing through Humanitarianism: India-Taiwan Cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief](#) (*practical cooperation*). Rather than reducing the Indo-Pacific to a simple US-China rivalry or a deterministic account of rising power transitions, this issue underscores the region as a strategically relational field where outcomes emerge from the interplay of structural selectivity and agent strategies.

Thus, reading through these articles, you can argue that the Indo-Pacific order is co-produced: China sets structural parameters, but diverse state strategies shape outcomes. Consequently, the region's future will not be determined by China alone, but by the multiplicity of relational strategies employed by regional actors. China's rise is rooted in authoritarian resilience and projected through initiatives like BRI. Yet regional responses, from Vietnam's hedging to India-Taiwan's functional cooperation, illustrate how states navigate structural constraints with strategic agency.

This issue also features Tonny Dian Effendi's review of the book ["Constructing Political Economy with Chinese Characteristics"](#).

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Notes

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