

World at Crossroads: From Scenarios to Action

These short summaries and discussions address highly complex global, regional, and translocal developments occurring up to March 2025, involving numerous actors, perspectives, and nuances. They do not offer comprehensive accounts or detailed analyses, and inevitably may overlook certain events, developments, or viewpoints. Instead, their purpose is to help stakeholders critically engage with the four RESPACE scenarios, stimulating reflection, strategic foresight, and deeper exploration of transformative possibilities for collaboration. Each RESPACE scenario outlines distinct, plausible future pathways but is explicitly not predictive. Users are encouraged to continuously adapt and update these Dialogue Inputs to reflect evolving contexts and emerging understandings.

Geopolitical Dynamics in Asia: South & East China Seas, Taiwan & Regional Tensions

May 2025

Summary & Context

Over the past year, the geopolitical landscape in Asia has been marked by heightened territorial tensions and military posturing. In the South China Sea, Chinese assertiveness reached new levels. Beijing expanded artificial islands and militarised outposts (now 20 in the Paracels and 7 in the Spratlys) with ports, airstrips and missile systems. Confrontations surged: Chinese coast guard and maritime militia vessels routinely harassed Philippine resupply missions to disputed shoals, even using water cannons and lasers. In 2024, there were near collisions as the Philippines defied Chinese blockades to reach its troops at Second Thomas Shoal. Each flare-up tested a fragile unofficial truce. While a temporary arrangement was discussed to avoid clashes, distrust runs deep.

In the East China Sea, Japan and China tangled over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The Japanese military budget has risen consistently in recent years, deploying missiles and radar in south-western islands as Chinese jets probe its airspace. Taiwan

remains the flashpoint. Post-election fury was on display in Beijing just days after the Taiwanese pro-independence-leaning candidate won the presidency. The Chinese military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted large-scale air and naval exercises. China also stepped up grey zone pressure: almost daily PLA aircraft incursions into the Taiwan Air Defense Identification Zone and live-fire drills in the Taiwan Strait following any pro-Taiwan statements by the United States or its allies.

Despite continued tensions, a diplomatic opening recently emerged: On 22 March 2025, the foreign ministers of China, Japan and South Korea held a rare trilateral meeting in Seoul, pledging mutual understanding and cooperation. They agreed to revive annual trilateral summits and restart dialogues on historical grievances, trade and regional security concerns. This move represents a significant diplomatic thaw after years of strained relations. In particular, it reflects shared regional interests in stability and economic cooperation

amidst global uncertainty and a trade war with the United States.

While tensions persist in India–China relations over their disputed Himalayan border, there are recent signs of improvement. In late 2024 and early 2025, both countries agreed on a partial disengagement deal, allowing phased withdrawals and resumption of patrolling in some border sectors. Despite these positive steps, however, a comprehensive resolution of the long-standing border dispute remains distant. Thousands of troops also remain forward deployed in Ladakh and Tibet. At the same time, India has deepened strategic ties with the United States, the Quad partners (Australia, India, Japan and the United States) and even Vietnam (for South China Sea cooperation). North Korea has continued testing missiles, possibly including advanced technology, while United States–South Korea joint military drills have escalated in the region.

Meanwhile, South Asia saw a dangerous flare-up. In April 2025, a militant attack in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed 26 civilians prompted India to launch cross-border strikes on alleged militant camps in Pakistan. By early May, the nuclear-armed rivals were embroiled in their worst confrontation

in decades – heavy shelling and missile attacks across the Line of Control killed an estimated 50 people as both sides traded threats of wider war. U.S. diplomacy helped broker a ceasefire on 10 May, halting the fighting, but the truce remains fragile: each side accused the other of initial violations, and both governments claimed ‘victory’ in the standoff. Islamabad welcomed Washington’s mediation, while New Delhi insisted that Kashmir disputes must be resolved bilaterally, rejecting outside intervention.

Across Southeast Asia, countries walk a tightrope – boosting defence cooperation with Washington and Tokyo but wary of provoking Beijing. The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) bloc pushed for a binding code of conduct with China on the South China Sea but the continuation of talks seems uncertain at the beginning of 2025. In general, the geopolitical arena in Asia is increasingly a chessboard of power plays: China aggressively pressing its territorial claims, the United States and its allies answering with military presence and partnerships, and regional states seeking new security arrangements. The risk of miscalculation is high but so too are efforts at diplomatic reimagining – for instance, proposals for multilateral maritime patrols or conflict-avoidance hotlines.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The regional trajectory aligns with a Walls scenario of intensified security competition. Nationalist fervour and military build-ups are front and centre – China fortifying islands, Japan rearming, the United States and its allies strengthening alliances. This is reminiscent of Walls futures in which states invest heavily in security and militarisation, and pursue unilateral force. Diplomatic mechanisms (such as ASEAN forums or UN maritime law) are sidelined, contrasting with a Maze scenario in which countries seek conflict resolution through international institutions. There is little sign of a Maze-like cooperative spirit in the South China Sea standoffs. Instead, each claimant doubles down on sovereignty claims. Similarly, the brief but intense India–Pakistan military crisis in May 2025 embodied

Walls dynamics: both governments answered violence with force and nationalist rhetoric, leaving scant room for diplomacy. The confrontation was only defused by eleventh-hour external mediation by a major world power – underscoring the absence of Maze-like institutional conflict-resolution tools in South Asia. A Towers dynamic is also visible: Asia Pacific actors are forming tight regional coalitions – for example, the Quad or the AUKUS partnerships – that act somewhat independently of global bodies, resembling the strong regional blocs in the Towers scenario. Notably, China is also trying to build an Asia-centric order via institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and by courting ASEAN. This too reflects a Tower mindset of region-based influence.

The recent trilateral diplomatic initiative between China, Japan and South Korea in March 2025 reinforces this Towers dynamic, as these regional powers show a renewed commitment – based on their immediate interests – to independently address historical grievances, economic cooperation and regional stability. This step toward pragmatic regional collaboration could either solidify regional autonomy (further strengthening the Towers dynamic) or potentially open pathways toward broader institutional cooperation (reminiscent of a Maze scenario). Given persistent geopolitical tensions, however, the exact trajectory remains uncertain.

Bridges elements (bottom–up peace efforts) are the hardest to spot in these interstate disputes. Civil society has limited leverage on issues such as Taiwan or the South China Sea, although there are voices of caution (scholars, activists calling for peace) in all countries. Bridges parallels could be imaginable if scientists or fishing communities from different countries quietly collaborate to manage shared resources despite the tensions. At present, however, such collaboration is rare. Overall, the geopolitical scene in Asia skews heavily toward power politics (Walls), tempered slightly by emerging regional alliances (Towers), with multilateral peacebuilding (Maze) and grassroots peace efforts (Bridges) mostly aspirational right now.

Discussion Questions

- **For Regional Peace Activists and NGOs:** In this climate of military posturing, what role can peace advocates in China, Taiwan, Japan, India or Southeast Asia play? Are there confidence-building measures civil society or Track 2 dialogues could advance? For instance, joint environmental or fisheries projects in disputed waters to keep lines of communication open. How can activists challenge nationalist narratives in their own countries that glorify armed solutions? For example, Japanese and Chinese peace groups campaigning jointly for maritime de-confliction protocols, Indian and Pakistani peace advocates jointly urging restraint and dialogue after the recent Kashmir clashes, or local Indian and Chinese communities advocating for dialogue over border clashes. How can peace-oriented civil society and advocacy groups encourage and support sustained diplomatic initiatives such as the trilateral dialogue between China, Japan and South Korea?
- **For Asian Policymakers and International Diplomats:** How can governments reduce the risk of accidental conflict in Asia? Should they pursue new regional agreements? Perhaps an Asian maritime code of conduct with real teeth. Or should they revive stalled dialogues? Perhaps by re-establishing hotlines and crisis communication between Beijing and Taipei, Delhi and Beijing, and Delhi and Islamabad. What is the responsibility of middle powers (ASEAN states, Australia, South Korea) to mediate between giants? And how might global institutions support regional peace? Is there room for a UN process or even an informal Helsinki-style process for the Indo-Pacific to collectively address security concerns? This would be a very Maze-like solution in a Walls-like context. Given the uncertainty of the trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea, how can regional policymakers proactively shape this initiative to enhance stable regional governance and cooperation without further fragmenting global governance? Could this regional effort become a model for pragmatic regional cooperation (Towers)? Or should there be intentional efforts to link this regional diplomacy to broader global institutional reform and collaboration (Maze)? What steps could help India and Pakistan turn their fragile US-brokered ceasefire into a lasting peace in South Asia? Could confidence-building measures – such as renewed backchannel talks or military hotlines – prevent a relapse into hostilities, or will any third-party mediation remain tenuous given New Delhi’s aversion to external involvement?

- **For the Private Sector:** Asian trade and technology sectors are deeply intertwined even as strategic tensions rise. How should businesses navigate this dual reality? For example, can tech companies and trade groups become informal ambassadors for peace by emphasising mutual economic stakes? For example, by highlighting that any war over Taiwan or sea lanes would disrupt global supply chains, hurting all sides. Could the prospect of economic loss galvanise corporate lobbies in China, the United States and across Asia to press their governments for stability? Such as quietly lobbying against escalation during a Taiwan crisis. Conversely, what risks arise if companies simply adapt by securing their own interests (relocating supply chains, etc.) without advocating for conflict prevention?
- **For Local Communities:** How are fisherfolk, farmers and coastal communities experiencing these geopolitical rifts? For instance, Filipino fishing communities at Scarborough Shoal being harassed by the Chinese coast guard or Taiwanese residents regularly hearing air-raid drills, or Kashmiri villagers along the Line of Control taking shelter from cross-border shelling. What coping strategies or local agreements have they developed? Do they avoid particular bodies of water or communicate informally with counterparts across borders? How can their lived experience be incorporated into higher-level negotiations? Empowering local voices – perhaps in establishing a platform for border village representatives from India and China or India and Pakistan to share concerns – might help humanise the territorial disputes. What would it take for policymakers to listen to those living on the frontlines of Asian flashpoints?

Explore the RESPACE scenarios here.

