



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

Analysing the Impact of Geopolitical Competition in the Indo-Pacific on the World Order

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Abstract

This article examines the geopolitical competition between great powers in the Indo-Pacific region and its impact on the world order. The Indo-Pacific holds significance because of different sea routes, alternative economic dynamism, potential flashpoints such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, etc., and the pursuit of divergent interests by major powers there. The involvement of great powers—especially their pursuit of divergent policies and the absence of conflict resolution mechanisms—makes the region geo-strategically, geopolitically, and geo-economically significant. The region has thus the potential to shape the emerging international order. Due to its network of strategic maritime outposts, the establishment of military installations, and its increasingly assertive role in the Indo-Pacific, China has positioned itself as a counterweight to the US—the hitherto dominant player in the region. Furthermore, China has shown dissatisfaction with the existing international security and economic arrangements, also known as the liberal world order. The US has declared China and Russia revisionist powers due to their anti-system stances and policies. Therefore, these antagonistic approaches—along with clashing values—to world order manifest in the region in territorial disputes, military competition, and trade wars. Consequently, the global trade and security architecture of the region will be central to the future design of international order. Theoretically, Power transition theory, power differential theory, balance-of-threat theory will be useful theoretical frameworks. Structural Realism—with its focus on lack of cooperation between great powers due to relative gains. The United States, as the dominant power, counters China's aggressive rise via military alliances like AUKUS and the Quad. Methodologically, the article is based on primary sources (official documents) and secondary sources. This article argues that the geopolitical competition going on in the Indo-Pacific will have profound implications for the existing world order.

Key Words: Indo-Pacific, Maritime order, United States, China, World Order, Naval Supremacy.

Introduction

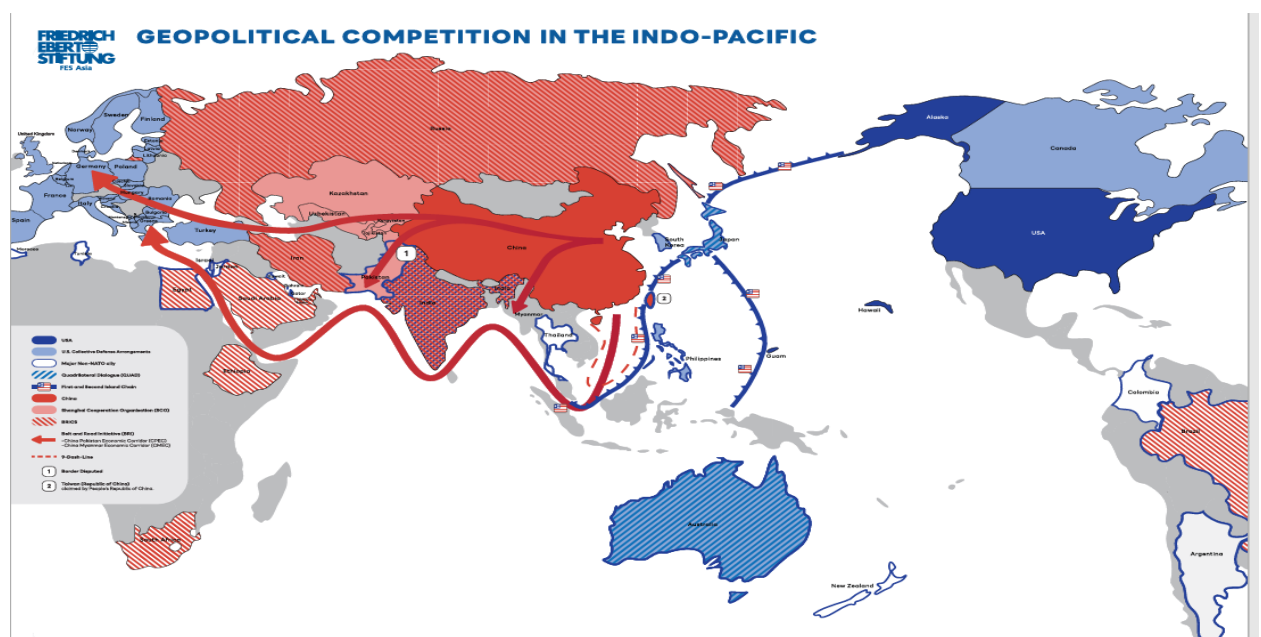
The Indo-Pacific region is of immense geostrategic significance, as some of the world's fastest-growing economies that link them to the Atlantic Ocean and the Asia-Pacific area are located there. China has been expanding its maritime footprint and its aspirations in



the area and beyond for more than ten years now. The security dynamic in the area has changed since 2013, when the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was initiated, and conflict-prone relations between China and Taiwan, as well as China's territorial claims and manmade islands (Spratly Island) in the South China Sea, have increased. India has voiced serious concerns over China's strategic partnership with Pakistan and its growing influence in the Indian Ocean. India has responded by reaffirming its involvement in the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) and the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) (QUAD), which is chaired by the United States. A new defense strategy has also been implemented by India.

Moreover, the US has shown concern about China's behaviour, particularly its strong stance on Taiwan and its "debt-trap diplomacy." The United States has voiced these concerns both bilaterally and internationally, such as via NATO's Strategic Concept. The sea lanes of the Indo-Pacific that link Asia with Africa, Europe, and the US are vulnerable to the ongoing geopolitical struggle between China and the US. These routes carry over one-third of global commerce and the bulk of the world's maritime oil traffic. Important passage sites along this route have the capacity to stop the global economy if they are blocked. Since March 2019, the EU's stance on China, its second-largest trade partner, has essentially not altered. China's assertiveness in the region evokes the EU's concern, as indicated in its March 2022 Strategic Compass. On September 16, 2021, the EU unveiled its first Indo-Pacific plan. Due in great part to disputed physical borders, the Indo-Pacific region is facing increasing strategic problems. In addition, it is the location of seven of the largest militaries in the world and three of the world's biggest economies, namely, China, India, and Japan (Ding , 2024).

The United States (US) has voiced concerns about the area in recent years due to China's growing military might, pointing out that the South China Sea is where one-third of all international commerce passes. India has become an integral part of any US attempts to thwart China's assertiveness in the region, as it is not only one of the highest spenders on defence but also one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. In this regard, the three most significant strategic players in the region are China, India, and the US (Sundaraman, 2022).





Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

The US Defence Department claimed in its 2021 report China possessed one of the biggest navies in the world—with three hundred and fifty-five ships. It was estimated to be increased up to four hundred and twenty ships by 2025 and to four hundred and sixty ships by 2030. Moreover, the naval ships are well-equipped with modern technologies and operated by a trained workforce (Chadha, 2023). China's submarines can fire nuclear-armed missiles, according to the US study. Beijing supports its territorial aspirations in the South China Sea by funding Chinese-operated marine militias in addition to its naval assets. There are over 120 militia boats known to exist. Another example of a marine militia is the Tanmen Maritime Militia, which is based on the island of Hainan. Beijing has found maritime militias to be quite helpful, as was evidenced in 2012 when it took the Scarborough Shoal—that was legally part of the Philippines—under its control. According to experts, Beijing may benefit from the use of citizen troops, or militias, as it provides them plausible deniability. With its biannual military white paper, China first indicated in 2008 that it was interested in building up the capacity to operate in foreign seas. China subsequently said in 2013 that it was interested in building the skills required to further its interests abroad. China made its goals clear in its 2015 defense white paper.



Source: EPRS, based on Aubry and Tétart; Graphic: Györgi Macsai.

Before moving on to discuss the divergent paths and interests of the US and China, it will help to shine theoretical light on the competition between them. Both states are pursuing different policies—from alliance formation to armament, etc.—to either catch up to the dominant power (US) or stop the rising one (China) from catching up.

The Balance of Power, Great-Power Competition, and War: A Conceptual Framework

No discussion of international politics is complete without the balance of power. Kenneth Waltz correctly claims that “if there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance of power is it” (Waltz, 1979). Stephen Walt argues that the explanatory appeal of alliance formation in the balance of power is beyond surprise, as history is replete with examples when states join hands against the most threatening one in the system (Walt, 1985). Winston Churchill explained the British longstanding policy: It has



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

been a policy of Great Britain (GB) for over four hundred years to stand up to the strongest, most belligerent, most overbearing nation in Europe. Instead of opportunistically siding with the stronger nations and benefiting from its position, GB took the harder path—joining hands with weaker nations—thus vanquishing any Continental military dictator (Churchill, 1948).

Professor Arnold Wolfers termed the role of the UK in Europe's balance of power system as a "balancer" rather than an ally of smaller states, as it accrued benefits from the equilibrium that it sought between its rival powers rather than between itself and its potential rivals (Wolfers, 1962). A balancer does not take sides in the competition between its rivals. In other words, it is "a position of splendid isolation", and it does not enter into a permanent alliance with either side (Morgenthau, 1967).

There is a debate where balance of power occurs automatically or is a result of conscious efforts of states people. Before delving deep into the debate, it is apt to add here that the roots of the balance of power can be traced to conservative political theory that takes a negative view of human nature, as given in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. There is a certain fear of unrestrained power in conservative political thought; hence, it is inclined to keep some check on power—to avoid its abuse (Wolfers, 1962). The methods employed by states to establish and maintain equilibrium include divide and rule, compensation, armament, alliance formation, and the presence of a balancer—to hold it (Morgenthau, 1967). So, one can observe equilibrium in the international system, but the question is how it occurs: automatically or through a conscious effort of leaders.

For some IR theorists like Henry Kissinger, leaders create and maintain balance of power, so it does not happen automatically. For scholars such as Kenneth Waltz, the balance of power is not voluntary but rather automatic, as states have to behave in an anarchic situation with varied distribution of capabilities. In other words, it is a systemic tendency. Kenneth Waltz emphasises that "the balance of power is not so much imposed by statemen on even as it is imposed by events on statement" (Waltz K. N., 1959). Whatever the case—whether the balance of power is voluntary or automatic—there exists equilibrium—until disturbed by war—throughout history in international politics.

Furthermore, alliance formation is constitutive of the equilibrium effort at the international level. There are two ways of survival for states in a competitive international environment: balancing and Bandwagoning. Bandwagoning is to join hands with the strongest state—for concrete benefits at low cost—while balancing is about making or joining an alliance against the strongest state (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012). This balancing effort bring threat into equation in international politics. Stephen Walt propounds the balance-of-threat theory. He points out that the balance of power theory holds that states only make an alliance against the most powerful state in the system, but according to the balance-of-threat theory, nations choose to form an alliance against the one that threatens them the most. The states against whom other states make an alliance are not only the strongest but also the most threatening, and the threat emanates from their geographical contiguity, belligerent intentions, or getting hold of potential means of subduing others (Walt, 1997). The level of threat then determines whether war plays any role in changing the international order or not.

Since the advent of the system of nation state in 1648, there have been 10 major wars involving great powers of the time and a massive loss of lives in those war (Rotberg & Rabb, 1989). Robert Gilpin builds on Thucydides' assertion that the driving force in international politics is the unequal growth of power among great powers, and he



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

differentiates between stable and unstable systems.

A stable system is one in which changes occur but without threatening the vital interests of the major powers, which can lead to war among them. An unstable system is one in which changes—economic, political, technological, etc.—occur that undermine the existing international order as well as threaten the position of the hegemonic state. In such a scenario, any crisis—diplomatic or an unanticipated event—could spiral into a hegemonic war between major powers (Gilpin, 1989).

Dale Copeland gave the dynamic differential theory (DDT) about the possibility of war between great powers—especially between the declining power and its rivals. There are three key assertions of the DDT: first, states are not rational actors but also security-seeking actors. Also, states remain wary of the intention of other states, especially rival states. It is highly likely that the hegemonic but militarily declining major power will initiate a war. Secondly, there needs to be a significant level of strategic superiority between the declining power and its rival in a multipolar system, while in a bipolar system, the declining power can initiate a war if it is almost equal or even second-ranked. Finally, there is higher probability of war between the declining power and its rival power, when the declining powers sees it decline as “deep and inevitable.” Furthermore, he breaks power down into three kinds: military, economic, and potential. In a multipolar world, there is more likelihood of war when the dominant power is declining in economic and potential terms; it is not the case if it is declining militarily, as alliance formation can help arrest the decline (Copeland, 2000). In such situations, war is more likely in a bipolar system than in a multipolar system. Moreover, such a war results in a new international order (Gilpin, 1989).

Two theories, namely, power transition and long cycle, explain the change in international order—through war. According to the advocates of power transition theory, war occurs when the rising power catches up with the hegemon, as was the case of the Peloponnesian War between Spart (the dominant power) and Athens (the rising power). The research of Graham Allison indicates that war had happened in 12 out of 16 cases during power transition—from the existing power to the rising one (Allison, 2017).

George Modelski argues in his Long Cycle Theory (LCT) that international politics goes through distinct cycles. Two conditions are important for cycles: the desire of a major power to alter the international structure and the characteristics and weaknesses of the existing world order. For Modelski, international orders are not permanent, so the dominant power is destined to face a rival. This leads to a costly competition, as maintaining territorial control across the global saps the energy and vitality of the hegemonic power. He adds that one major power gains ascendancy after a major war and structures the world according to its design and vision. The position of the dominant power is not unenviable, so it attracts a competitor. The world moves towards multipolarity after some time. The competition gets fiercer with the passage of time. The system eventually collapses under the weight of the “oligopolistic competition” between the existing and the rival powers, and it moves towards a minimum requirement—order (Modelski, 1978). Hence, there will be war between the US and China if theory and history are reliable guides.

The following section is about the reasons behind the potential conflict between China and the US.

China First Foreign Naval Base

The construction of a first-ever military (naval) base in Djibouti in 2017 is another



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

noteworthy event that demonstrates China's assertiveness. Beijing defended the facility's need by stating that it would conduct peacekeeping missions and concentrate on protecting its citizens abroad, but it is worth noting here that it also provides China a larger strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. China's strategic goals are still unclear in spite of these events and the slow shift in tone. More precisely, it is evident that China is seeking strategic capabilities overseas, but it is still unclear what China wants to accomplish first, how it plans to do it, and what it is prepared to give up (like unrestricted access to the Strait of Malacca) in order to fulfil its territorial aspirations in the region. One may argue that the West can get some guidance about its objectives in the Indo-Pacific from the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). Beijing has made large investments in a number of nations, and it seems that it plans to utilize these funds for military objectives as well. It is questionable to what degree this can be accomplished, but some analysts argue that private investment will not be able to provide China with the military capabilities it desires (Kumar & Kumar, 2023).

One-China principle and Taiwan

China knows that many Western and adjacent nations will not support its strategic goals, especially Beijing's understanding of the "One-China principle," and its claim on Taiwan. Building on this understanding, analysts clarify that China has been meticulously formulating a strategic plan that would best protect its key interests in the event that the United States, India, and other like-minded nations choose to retaliate—in the case of PLA's action against Taiwan. Several artificial military outposts have been established in the South China Sea so far as a result of China's strategic goal. Senior US military officials claimed that they were meant to increase Beijing's offensive capacity beyond its continental borders. China will be better equipped to keep an eye on the Strait of Malacca and stop the US from possibly blocking this vital trade route thanks to these military installations. More specifically, PLAN-led vessels will find it simpler to reach the Strait of Malacca, which is where 80% of China's oil imports go (hence the Malacca Dilemma). It is important to note that China views Beijing's expanding ties with Pakistan and Myanmar as a possible substitute for the Strait of Malacca. The energy dimension is clear from the fact that China became the world's biggest net importer of crude oil in 2013. The BRI also shows China's scramble for energy security (Lobo, 2023).

Growing Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership

There is evidence that China circumvented the Strait of Malacca in 2013—by connecting to Myanmar to the Indian Ocean via the Kyaukpyu pipeline. The oil pipeline that links the Sittwe and Kunming deep-water ports can transport 22 million tonnes of oil annually. This pipeline can also transport 12 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually. A Chinese business was awarded the crucial contract for the Pakistan-China oil pipeline by the Pakistani government in 2021. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that China is responsible for 30% of Pakistan's total foreign debt. In response, Pakistani officials have given Chinese businesses the pipeline contract, along with a portion of the pipeline's revenues and entire ownership. Information now available indicates that despite Pakistan's severe financial problems, the project will proceed. China has been working with Moscow under President Xi Jinping to find long-term answers to the country's growing energy reliance.

In fact, China and Russia have a mutually beneficial relationship as Russia can provide the majority of China's energy demands, reducing China's dependency on goods that



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

cross the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. Russia's uninterrupted supply of energy will enable China to pursue its foreign policy goals without any risk. Russia constructed the Power of Siberia pipeline and is now developing the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline (which is expected to have a capacity just marginally lower than the original Nord Stream 2) to enable the direct supply of gas to China. President Xi Jinping has gone one step further, looking for routes in the Arctic that China may utilize to get its oil and gas from Russia and sell its commodities to Europe. Additionally, the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline, which started operations in 2009, finishes in Khorgos in the Xinjiang after passing through central Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan from the Turkmenistan/Uzbekistan border. The pipeline can carry 60 billion cubic meters annually over its three lines.

String of Pearl Approach

China under Xi Jinping will be more autonomous by creating alternate energy lines, meaning it will be free to pursue its territorial and geopolitical goals with less interference from other forces. The Indo-Pacific strategy of China is based on military as well as economic calculus—both at regional and global levels. Differently put, China's policy for the region revolves around investments in “strongpoints”, which are not only close to its borders but also to India. The ‘string of pearls plan’ is the name given to China's approach by Booz Allen Hamilton in a 2004 study. It suggests that China's strategy is to develop dual-use—both for civilian and military purposes—marine infrastructure. China has so succeeded in achieving this objective via the BRI. A number of strategic investments in ports around the Indian Ocean that might serve as a number of naval stations have been made by China as part of the BRI. With the use of these outposts, China may surround its neighbours and get closer to key choke points in the Indo-Pacific.

China's Advantages and Disadvantages in Indo-Pacific

Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka

It is important to note that China has got a bridgehead in the Bay of Bengal through Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka), which falls nearer to China than the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). China can station its PLAN warships at the Hambantota Port. However, the Sri Lankan had to reassure India that the Port would not be used for strategic purposes. Nevertheless, a PLAN warship made its way to the harbor in August 2022.

Gwadar Port, Pakistan

The geostrategic location of Gwadar Port—thanks to its proximity to India and the Strait of Hormuz—makes it militarily significant. Large ships may use the port's infrastructure, as Pakistan navy is based there; so, some PLAN warships may dock there in the future. The Chinese Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC)—which operates the port—is bound by law to extend help if the PLA needs it. Moreover, as a part of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China has invested in Karachi Port Trust to construct a commercial port—it means four extra berths for ships.

Kyaukpyu Port, Myanmar

Chinese firms built an industrial park and a deep-sea port in Myanmar in 2016. According to a deal, the port will be controlled by the Chinese firms for fifty years. Like Hambantota Port, Kyaukpyu Port will give China access—both to the Andaman Sea and



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

the Bay of Bengal.

Ream Naval Base, Cambodia

News reports claim that China and the Cambodian government came to a secret deal for the construction and usage of the Ream Naval Base as a base for PLAN warships. It will enable China to have access to the western part of the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, and the Gulf of Thailand.

Laem Chabang Port, Thailand

As extensions of the China-Laos high-speed train system, Laem Chabang Port and the China-Laos (Thailand) railway will be completed by 2028. The BRI benefits both; in particular, the Thai energy business Gulf Energy Development and the state-owned China Harbor Engineering business (CHEC) formed a private partnership to extend the port. China would get critically important logistical help from this port.

Dar es Salaam Port, Tanzania

State-owned Chinese enterprises have improved the Port of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania by developing seven of its berths and constructing a new terminal, according to a Chinese news agency. Despite the strategic significance of the Mozambique Channel, China has reassured states that it will not use it for strategic purposes. This waterway is important because it provides access to a wealth of natural resources and has geostrategic relevance in the western Indian Ocean.

Logistics Facility, Djibouti

The Djibouti's logistical center is really China's first overseas naval station, despite China's denials, according to Western politicians and academics. They emphasise that the facility gives PLAN warships easy access to the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, which serves as an entry point to the Suez Canal and – by extension – to the oil markets of Europe and North America, as well as the Asian and African oil markets. Strengths and limitations of China's plan in the end, China's closeness to the Indian Ocean and its control of the majority of the East China Sea coastline, as well as part of the South China Sea coastline, give it the largest advantage in the area. Due to its close proximity, it makes rapid deployment of forces easier for China (Bonnie, 2016).

Chinese Strength and Weakness

The Belt and Road Initiative enhances China's influence in the area. Beijing is pursuing ports capable of accommodating PLA and PLAN operations for the storage of equipment and housing of PLAN troops. These ports must include integrated ramps for unloading substantial cargo and deep-water facilities capable of accommodating huge, heavy vessels, including battleships. China has carefully positioned these commercial ventures along the Maritime Silk Road, potentially serving both economic and military purposes. Accordingly, President Xi Jinping has maintained that civilian military integration is essential for a robust PLA, and China promoted this in its 2015 white paper. However, since the infrastructure is hidden in business settings, Chinese authorities have often disputed the dual purpose of BRI projects. By compelling its neighbours to endorse or at the very least tolerate its policies over Taiwan, China may subsequently take advantage of economic pressure. For example, it can arm-twist—using its economic leverage—other states to recognise Chinese sovereignty over parts of the South China Sea.



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

Similarly, observers think that interests of China in the Strait of Hormuz may be protected by the strategic position of Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which depends on its capacity to house Chinese PLA surface fighters. Because of the large amounts of oil that flow through it (about 17 million barrels per day). One needs to bear in mind that the latter is considered a highly significant choke point in the world (Frecon, 2015).

The United State Naval Strategies in Indo-Pacific

The United States Navy possesses superior capabilities and more heavily armed warships than the PLA's Navy, despite the latter having the world's largest fleet of surface combatants. Specifically, regarding the deployment of cruise missiles, US Navy vessels possess a superior strategic perspective and are equipped with a greater arsenal of offensive missiles. It has been said that China lacks reliable allies. Nevertheless, other regional nations may depend on other sources of security such as the Indo-US strategic partnership and other alliances. In addition, several of the above-mentioned ports are located in conflict-prone territories (like the Himalaya), so their use in critical times is subject to doubt.

US policy Standings in the Indo-Pacific

The United States Navy (USN) was the world's most potent navy at the conclusion of World War II. Over the last several years, China's naval force has grown to an even greater number of vessels than the USN. Nonetheless, many observers believe that the USN has a larger metric tonnage, indicating that it has larger ships than China. China's fleet was just 1.8 million tons as of 2019, whereas the USN fleet was 4.6 million tons. However, a more formidable navy may not necessarily result from having a greater metric tonnage and, thus, from operating bigger boats that can carry heavier weaponry (Bowring, 2019). Quantifying a navy's strength also heavily depends on other elements, such its air defense capability.

The US has voiced concerns about China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific, just as India has. This worry has been reflected in NATO's strategic concept, its Indo-Pacific policy, its National Security policy, and its bilateral security agreements with Indo-Pacific nations. The US now faces a significant regional rival as a result of China's ascent. The US's global dominance and its Indo-Pacific allies are in danger due to China's aggressiveness and posturing. The US has also been adamantly against China's Belt and Road Initiative. In its Indo-Pacific strategy, the US has laid emphasis on the region's significance to US interests; in fact, the Indo-Pacific (as defined by the US) has attracted US\$900 billion in FDI, employs a large number of Americans, and continues to appear to have unmatched economic growth potential. The five main goals of Biden's Indo-Pacific policy were: a free and open Indo-Pacific, establishing links—both within and beyond; promoting prosperity and enhancing security; and fostering regional resilience. The main goal of the strategy was to keep empowering and assisting the regional leadership of India (Bose, 2006).

AUKUS and QUAD Countering Chinese Influences

The QUAD and the AUKUS trilateral security agreement enhance cooperation among the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Additional measures include enhancing bilateral security cooperation between the United States and South Korea and Japan, as well as strengthening NATO's ties with regional nations. The United States' strategic emphasis on the Indo-Pacific is exemplified by the Pacific Deterrence Initiative,



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

which seeks to augment the deterrence of the U.S., give reassurance to allies, and counter any threat emanating from adversaries (Madclef, 2020). The military policy of the United States is based on coordinated deterrence. Washington plans to deploy 60% of its surface vessels to the Indo-Pacific to safeguard its borders and trade lines. In turn, there are around 200 ships and 1,500 aircraft in the US naval force that is required in the Indo-Pacific (Mishra, 2019).

The US also aims to protect Taiwan by deploying its naval forces. The policy of “strategic ambiguity” on the Taiwan issue remains intact, notwithstanding President Biden’s assertion of defending it in case of China’s invasion. According to the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, the US would provide necessary wherewithal (weapons) to Taiwan when attacked by China. The following US bases are located in the area:

Naval facility in Diego Garcia

A naval support station at Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean Territory (GB), and a base in the Seychelles for drone operations, provide the US Navy an immense military advantage in the Indian Ocean and the Mozambique Channel.

Naval Base in Djibouti

Having a naval facility in Djibouti gives the USN a footing in the Gulf of Aden and control over the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb. The US has a presence in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and, most significantly, close proximity to the Strait of Hormuz thanks to airbases in Saudi Arabia and Oman, bases in Bahrain—both airbase and a naval facility, Qatar’s airbase, and the United Arab Emirates’ airbase and port.

Singapore's Naval and Aviation Base

The possession of bases in the Strait of Malacca given US an unparalleled strategic advantage unlike PLAN warships of China.

Thailand’s Naval Facility

The media reports that Thailand continues to grant the United States access to its military bases located at Sattahip and U-tapao. In 2015, Washington entered into a lease agreement with a private contractor for a segment of the base, aimed at providing logistical support during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Four Airbases in the Philippines

The US and the Philippines signed a treaty of Mutual Defence in 1951. It was stipulated that the Philippines would provide four airbases to the US. With the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, they have now reaffirmed this pledge. The United States now has access to four more military bases in the Philippines as of February 2023 because to this deal. The deterrence strategy of the US navy hinges on these sites.

Naval and Air Force Base in Guam

One of the largest US Pacific fleet support sites is the naval and air force facility located in Guam. It gives the United States a solid base in the Philippine Sea. Since Guam serves as the center of US military activities in the Second Island Chain. In 2022, the US sent B-52—the nuclear-capable bombers—there.

Three Airbases and Three Naval Stations in Japan

The history of the US-Japan relations is a chequered one. The 1960 Security



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

Treaty is the foundation of the strong military partnership between them. The closeness of the US base at Okinawa, Japan, near Taiwan makes it very crucial from a geostrategic viewpoint. The United States' considerable power projection capability, and hence its deterrence policy, is enhanced by a military presence in this area. It further permits the United States to conduct various surveillance activities in the East China Sea. Similar to Taiwan, Okinawa has a key location within the First Island Chain, as it restricts China's access to the western part of the Pacific.

Two Military Bases in South Korea

The US has two largest overseas bases—with thirty-six thousand military personnel—in South Korea. Because of their position, the US can defend against any assault in the East and South China Seas as well as the Yellow Sea. South Korea and the US conducted joint military exercises in December 2022—using B-52 nuclear-capable aircraft.

Air and Naval Base in Australia

The bases in Australia not only provide an opportunity to the US to keep an eye on China but also do deter North Korea from any military adventure. Currently, Australia's navy and aviation facilities serve as support bases. The United States has said that it intends to use nuclear-armed B-52 aircraft. These aircraft may be used for both strategic surveillance and anti-ship operations. China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean has compelled Australia to expand and deepen contact with the United States (Joshi, 2017).

The Advantages and Disadvantages of the US Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

An extensive network of partners and friends has resulted from the US's long-standing involvement in the area, giving it a significant edge in handling any tension or war in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, a strong domestic defense sector supports the US army. Experts contend that the US, together with its friends and partners, still has sway over the area and has the potential to defeat the PLA, particularly in the western Pacific, where several US naval facilities are situated. With its air bases in Thailand and the Philippines, as well as its naval port in Singapore, the United States maintains a strong front despite China's recent construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea. Some contend that because of its closeness to Taiwan, China should likewise be cognizant of the US airbase on the Okinawan Island chain in Japan (Bagale, 2019).

However, because the United States is mostly headquartered in Australia and the Arabian Sea, Chinese submarines have more freedom to operate in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, the US has established a robust perimeter around China, bolstering and legitimising its deterrent posture, as evidenced by the deployment of B-52 nuclear-capable aircraft in Australia and Guam and joint military exercises with South Korea. The United States is still at the forefront of military technology and military force projection. Experts, however, highlight China's invention explosion, which is progressively advancing it towards possible technical leadership in a few fields (Gosh, 2014). Numerous observers believe that its robust commercial and economic standing, together with a revised BRI strategy, might progressively heighten its significance as a regional security actor. On the other hand, China may never be able to overtake the US as a superpower, according to the Asia Power Index's results. However, given its fast-advancing military capabilities, the same assessment points out that China does not need to overtake the US in order to threaten American dominance in Asia. China's military might may not be as strong as the US, but it is unquestionably stronger than those of its



neighbors.

Struggle for Supremacy in the Indo-Pacific and its Impact on the World Order

The escalating geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific signifies a pivotal moment for the world order. The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the primary arena for major states to exert influence, evaluate alliances, and establish new norms of engagement as the global economic and geopolitical center of gravity shifts eastward. The dynamics of this region, characterized by competition among United States allies and China, the assertiveness of middle powers such as India, Japan, and Australia, and the increasing significance of ASEAN members, are transforming the foundational concepts of the international order established post-World War II. The competition in the Indo-Pacific underscores a clash between two concepts of global order. The US and its allies strive for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” by emphasizing rules-based governance, freedom of navigation, and compliance with international law.

In contrast, China advocates a more hierarchical, state-centric approach, seeking to augment its power via initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and asserting historical claims, as seen in the South China Sea. In addition to traditional military battles, the struggle among these many paradigms includes diplomatic influence, economic strategies, and technological standards. This competition has substantial and diverse repercussions. Strategic instability ranks first among the concerns. If inadequately managed, military escalations, naval confrontations, and contested territorial claims might easily escalate into broader conflicts. The rivalry is undermining global governance. Instead of a unified international system, we are seeing the emergence of competing institutions and regional alliances designed to align with distinct power blocs. Third, via the use of “hedging” strategies—navigating relationships with both major powers to optimize their strategic autonomy—smaller and intermediate countries are exercising more agency.

The Indo-Pacific competition is further accelerating the dissemination of power in international relations. No one party, even China or the United States, can unilaterally dictate outcomes. This creates opportunities as well as risks. While heightened volatility poses a danger, it also presents an opportunity to establish more resilient and inclusive regional frameworks that more equitably reflect the diverse array of interests at play. The regional architecture will likely be significantly influenced by multilateral entities such as the Quad, including the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, as well as ASEAN-centered platforms. The global conflict in the Indo-Pacific is contributing to the gradual decline of the post-1945 liberal international order. The new system is a more intricate, multipolar, and competitive global order. This alteration is unlikely to be coherent or fluid. The global framework of the next decades will be influenced by phases of strategic realignments, selective cooperation, and intense rivalry. The Indo-Pacific is fundamentally the crucible in which the future configurations of the international order are being forged, rather than just a regional arena. Leaders, scholars, and policymakers must recognize that global peace and development depend on stability and prosperity in this region. Essential will oversee competition without engaging in violence, strengthening inclusive institutions, and promoting trust-building and communication initiatives. The choices made in the Indo-Pacific will have repercussions that extend beyond the region and will shape the geopolitical landscape of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion



Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

The Indo-Pacific has become one of the key theatres for great powers such as the US and China and middle powers such as India, Japan, and Australia. Not only is the region a major sea trade route, but three of the largest economies (China, India, and Japan) are also located there. There is a divergence of interests between China and the US: the US wants to maintain the status quo, while China tries to alter it. Both China and the US employ various strategies such as armament, establishing bases, forming alliances, etc., to protect their vital interests. The impact of the tug-of-war between the great powers on the international political and economic order is profound: the winning of the US means the triumph of the liberal world order, while the winning of China means an illiberal, capitalist-cum-communist authoritarian international structure. The question is whether the transition—from the liberal to capitalist-cum-communist authoritarian international order—will be peaceful or violent. War—either direct or proxy ones—will determine the fate of the world order, if history and theory are any guide. Hence, the maintenance of the existing liberal world order or its supplanting by a China-led international order hinges on the geopolitical and geo-economic drama being played at the Indo-Pacific theatre.

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Vol. 3 No. 5 (May) (2025)

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