



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

The US-China Competition in Indo-Pacific Region: Implication for Chinese Energy Security

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region has become the focal point of strategic rivalry between the United States and China, driven by economic interests, military posturing, and crucial energy security concerns. This study explores how the U.S. counters China's rise through alliances like the Quad, naval dominance, and support for regional partners, particularly India, in key maritime zones such as the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait. In response, China employs a multifaceted strategy combining infrastructure diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), rapid naval modernization, and an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) posture to secure its maritime interests and diversify its energy supply routes. The paper highlights the growing geopolitical complexity of the Indo-Pacific, revealing how energy security is deeply embedded in China's strategic calculus. A comparative analysis of Quad and A2/AD underscores the shifting balance of power and the long-term implications for regional stability.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has become the primary theater of strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. As a maritime space encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, it plays a vital role in shaping global trade and energy dynamics. Over 60% of global maritime trade and 80% of China's energy imports pass through this region, making it a critical domain for economic and security interests alike (Kaplan 2010). For the United States, ensuring open sea lanes and supporting regional allies like India, Japan, and Australia forms the basis of its Indo-Pacific strategy. For China, securing energy supply lines and expanding strategic influence are central to its foreign policy agenda.

Following the announcement of the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" and later the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, Washington has intensified its military presence and diplomatic alliances to counterbalance China's rise (Medcalf 2013). In response, China has strengthened its regional posture through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and its Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) military doctrine (Cordesman and Kendall 2016). These efforts are aimed at circumventing U.S. naval dominance and ensuring secure access to key maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea.

This paper investigates how and where the United States encounters China in the Indo-Pacific region through military deployments, diplomatic alignments, and economic strategies. It also explores China's strategic responses,



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

particularly in the context of energy security, maritime control, and naval modernization. By analyzing both confrontation and countermeasures, this study contributes to understanding the evolving balance of power and the long-term strategic consequences in the Indo-Pacific region.

Significance of the Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly central to the strategic calculations of global powers due to its economic vitality, dense sea lanes, and contested geopolitical terrain. Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa through the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific, this maritime expanse connects major economies and underpins global trade networks. Over 60% of global maritime trade passes through the Indo-Pacific, including critical energy supplies destined for East Asia, particularly China (Kaplan 2010). The region includes several key chokepoints—such as the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz—which serve as lifelines for energy-importing nations.

China's growing dependence on external energy sources underscores the strategic importance of these waterways. Approximately 80% of China's crude oil imports transit through the Strait of Malacca, making it a vulnerable "Malacca Dilemma" for Chinese strategic planners (Hamzah 2016). The South China Sea alone accounts for more than \$3 trillion in annual trade, with over a third of global shipping passing through its waters (CSIS 2023). Control over or disruption in these chokepoints would have significant global economic consequences.

This region also includes vital U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia, which collectively form a strong balancing presence against China's maritime ambitions. U.S. strategic posture in the region, including military bases in Japan, Guam, and Diego Garcia, is designed to ensure freedom of navigation and deter coercive behavior (Green 2017). As both China and the United States expand their military and diplomatic footprints in the Indo-Pacific, the region becomes not only a hub of commerce but a flashpoint for great power competition.

The US Encounters with China: Strategic Confrontation Points

The United States counters China on multiple strategic fronts across the Indo-Pacific. This confrontation is not only military but extends to diplomacy, infrastructure development, and influence over regional states. As China's regional ambitions rise, Washington has repositioned itself to maintain maritime supremacy, ensure the security of its allies, and uphold a rules-based order. The following subsections identify five key zones of confrontation and describe how these interactions shape the broader geopolitical balance.

1) Support for India and Formation of QUAD

One of the United States' most visible counter-China measures has been its strengthening of bilateral relations with India and the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes India, the US, Japan, and Australia. The QUAD, once dormant, was revitalized in 2017 to promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and to balance China's growing assertiveness (Grossman 2021).

India and the United States have signed several foundational defense agreements such as COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement)



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement), enhancing India's operational capabilities and interoperability with U.S. forces (Pant and Sahu 2020). The Malabar naval exercises have also evolved into a QUAD-based multilateral show of force, signaling strategic alignment against China's influence (Parameswaran 2020).

2) Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea

The South China Sea has become a flashpoint for US-China naval tensions. China claims nearly 90% of this sea through its "Nine-Dash Line" and has constructed artificial islands equipped with radar systems, airstrips, and missile installations (O'Rourke 2023). In response, the U.S. conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) under international maritime law to challenge excessive Chinese claims.

The U.S. Seventh Fleet regularly patrols this region, including near the Spratly and Paracel Islands, to assert navigational rights and support allies such as Vietnam and the Philippines (CSIS 2022). While the operations are defensive in nature, they are seen by China as provocations and are often met with aggressive warnings or counter-patrols (Fravel 2019).

3) Taiwan Strait and Political Signaling

The Taiwan Strait has witnessed increasing geopolitical tension, with the U.S. reinforcing its unofficial support for Taiwan amid Chinese military coercion. Though Washington adheres to the "One China" policy, it maintains strong defense ties with Taipei under the Taiwan Relations Act. Recent years have seen increased arms sales to Taiwan, including advanced missile systems and fighter jets (Congressional Research Service 2022).

US Navy warships frequently transit the Taiwan Strait as a symbolic assertion of international navigational rights and deterrence against Chinese reunification threats (Wright 2021). High-level visits by American lawmakers and officials to Taipei have further strained relations with Beijing, which views them as interference in its internal affairs (Smith 2022).

4) East China Sea and the US-Japan Defense Alliance

In the East China Sea, the U.S. supports Japan in its territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Washington has reiterated that Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applies to these islands, committing to Japan's defense in case of an armed attack (Hornung 2019).

The U.S. military presence in Okinawa—equipped with missile defense systems and F-35 stealth fighters—acts as a deterrent to Chinese expansionism in the region (Cooper 2020). The two nations conduct joint air and sea patrols and intelligence-sharing missions to monitor Chinese incursions and maintain regional balance (Green 2017).

4) Control of Maritime Choke-Points

The U.S. maintains a formidable presence at key maritime choke-points vital to China's energy and trade lifelines. Bases in Diego Garcia (Indian Ocean), Bahrain (near the Strait of Hormuz), and Singapore (Strait of Malacca) enable Washington to potentially monitor—or block—critical sea lanes used by Chinese vessels (Brewster 2014).



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

This geographic advantage presents a strategic dilemma for China, which fears encirclement and blockade in the event of a conflict. The so-called “Malacca Dilemma,” referring to China’s dependence on the narrow Strait of Malacca for 80% of its oil imports, highlights the vulnerability Beijing seeks to mitigate through diversification and military build-up (Hamzah 2016; Erickson and Collins 2008).

In summary, the United States encounters China across several geopolitical hotspots through military alliances, naval operations, arms sales, and control of maritime infrastructure. These encounters reflect not only competition for regional dominance but also a deeper struggle over the future rules of international order. The intensity and frequency of these confrontations indicate a long-term strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

What are China’s Strategic Response to US Encounters?

Faced with an expanding U.S. presence and encirclement in the Indo-Pacific, China has adopted a multifaceted approach that blends economic outreach, military modernization, and geopolitical influence-building. These responses aim not only to safeguard China’s sovereignty and maritime interests but also to secure critical energy routes and mitigate strategic vulnerabilities such as the “Malacca Dilemma.” Beijing’s core strategies include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), rapid naval expansion, deepened regional trade alliances, and the implementation of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) mechanisms.

1) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road

The BRI, launched in 2013, serves as China’s flagship global infrastructure and influence project. A central component is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which links Chinese ports to the Indian Ocean and beyond through strategic investments in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Rolland 2017). By developing port infrastructure in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), China secures vital maritime chokepoints and gains potential dual-use facilities that support both trade and naval operations (Chatzky and McBride 2020).

Critics argue these projects amount to “debt-trap diplomacy,” while China frames them as win-win partnerships for global development. Nevertheless, the geopolitical utility of BRI investments has become increasingly evident, especially as China attempts to counterbalance U.S. maritime dominance (Fulton 2020).

2) China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The \$62 billion CPEC is the most critical BRI project concerning China’s energy security. Stretching from China’s Xinjiang region to Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea, CPEC offers Beijing an alternative to the Strait of Malacca, effectively bypassing a chokepoint that the U.S. could potentially block during conflict (Small 2015). The corridor includes road and rail infrastructure, gas pipelines, and port development, facilitating direct Chinese access to the Middle East and Africa.

CPEC also strengthens the Sino-Pakistani alliance, placing strategic pressure on India and signaling Beijing’s growing reach into South Asia (Markey and West



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

2016). While there are concerns over security in Baluchistan and delays in implementation, the corridor represents a long-term investment in regional connectivity and strategic depth.

3) Naval Modernization and Military Expansion

China's naval modernization has been swift and extensive. Between 2010 and 2020, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has transformed into the largest navy in the world by number of vessels, with plans to invest over \$140 billion by 2040 (O'Rourke 2023). China has commissioned multiple aircraft carriers—including the Shandong and Fujian—while expanding its fleet of nuclear submarines, amphibious assault ships, and stealth frigates (Talmadge 2020).

Beyond hardware, China is increasing its military footprint abroad. Its first overseas military base in Djibouti (near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait) demonstrates its ambition to project power beyond East Asia (Erickson and Strange 2016). Reports suggest additional port access agreements in Cambodia and Equatorial Guinea, underscoring China's goal to create a network of overseas supply points to support far-seas operations (Rehman 2020).

4) Economic Alliances and RCEP Membership

China's economic strategy also involves the formation of multilateral trade frameworks to counter U.S.-led coalitions. Its participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—the world's largest free trade bloc including ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—strengthens China's economic ties in the Indo-Pacific (Petri and Plummer 2020).

By integrating supply chains and lowering tariffs, RCEP allows China to reduce its dependence on Western markets and isolate U.S. influence economically. This trade connectivity also provides leverage over U.S. allies, encouraging them to prioritize economic engagement over strategic confrontation (Kuo 2021).

5) A2/AD Strategy and Island Militarization

China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy is aimed at deterring U.S. intervention in its near seas, particularly in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. This doctrine relies on long-range missiles (e.g., DF-21D and DF-26 "carrier killers"), air defense systems, cyber warfare, and space-based intelligence capabilities (Krepinevich 2010). By deploying A2/AD assets along its coastline and artificial islands, China seeks to restrict U.S. operational freedom within the First Island Chain.

The militarization of features in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, including runways, radar systems, and surface-to-air missile installations, further solidifies China's strategic position (CSIS 2022). Although these efforts face international criticism and legal challenges—such as the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling against Chinese claims—Beijing continues to consolidate control over disputed waters (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016).

China's defense white papers also emphasize "active defense" and maritime domain awareness, revealing a doctrinal shift from coastal defense to power projection (State Council of PRC 2019). In strategic terms, these military measures represent a response to U.S. efforts to constrain China's rise and secure



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

energy routes vital for national development.

China's strategic responses to U.S. encounters reflect a holistic approach to power projection. From diversifying trade routes and building infrastructure abroad to expanding military reach and influencing regional trade architecture, China is asserting itself as a comprehensive regional power. These actions are deeply tied to energy security, maritime control, and the protection of sovereignty in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific.

The Role of Energy Security in the US-China Power Play

Energy security is a central driver of China's strategic behavior in the Indo-Pacific. As the world's largest energy importer, China faces a significant vulnerability: over 80% of its oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca—a narrow maritime chokepoint closely monitored and potentially controllable by the United States Navy (Kaplan 2010; U.S. Energy Information Administration 2019). This strategic exposure, often referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma," has shaped China's geopolitical calculations, prompting expansive efforts to diversify energy routes, enhance military power projection, and build strategic partnerships.

1) China's Energy Dependence and the Malacca Dilemma

China's rapid industrial growth has led to soaring energy consumption, with oil, gas, and coal forming the backbone of its energy mix. By 2023, China was importing more than 10 million barrels of crude oil per day, with over 60% of that volume passing through the Strait of Malacca (IEA 2023). The Chinese leadership recognizes that any potential disruption—whether due to conflict, piracy, or U.S. intervention—could severely impact the national economy and military readiness (Erickson and Collins 2010).

Former President Hu Jintao coined the term "Malacca Dilemma" in 2003, referring to the strategic vulnerability posed by China's reliance on this single passage (Storey 2006). In response, Beijing has adopted both military and economic strategies aimed at securing alternative routes and reducing dependence on maritime chokepoints dominated by the U.S. and its allies.

2) The U.S. Maritime Leverage as a Strategic Tool

The United States maintains formidable control over key sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) through its naval presence in Diego Garcia, Bahrain, and Singapore, as well as regular patrolling of the South China Sea and Indian Ocean via the 5th and 7th Fleets (Yung, Rustici, and Saunders 2014). This allows Washington to exert immense pressure on Chinese maritime trade and energy flows in any future conflict scenario (Gholz and Press 2010).

The U.S. Navy's emphasis on maintaining a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" also serves as a strategic counter to China's growing influence. Under the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) doctrine, the U.S. challenges Chinese maritime claims, indirectly signaling that it could jeopardize China's energy lifeline if deterrence fails (Patalano 2020). Hence, energy security is not only a logistical concern for China but also a geopolitical vulnerability the U.S. actively exploits as part of its Indo-Pacific grand strategy.

3) China's Countermeasures: Diversification and Deterrence

To mitigate the Malacca Dilemma, China has initiated several countermeasures.



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

Projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and oil pipelines connecting Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port to Yunnan Province provide alternative routes that bypass the Strait of Malacca (Small 2015; Ghosh 2020). Although these routes do not yet rival the capacity of the South China Sea corridor, they offer strategic depth in case of crisis.

Moreover, China has stockpiled strategic petroleum reserves (SPR) and invested in overseas energy assets across Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East to reduce dependency on U.S.-influenced supply chains (Downs 2010; EIA 2019). Beijing has also fostered long-term energy agreements with Russia and Central Asian states via land-based pipelines like Power of Siberia, shielding a portion of its supply from maritime threats (Gabuev 2015).

4) Energy Security as a Driver of Military Modernization

China's naval modernization is intrinsically linked to the goal of securing overseas energy supply lines. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is transitioning from a coastal defense force to a blue-water navy capable of operating in the far seas. The development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities—including carrier-killer missiles like the DF-21D and DF-26—is designed to deter U.S. intervention near Chinese maritime lifelines (Krepinevich 2010; Talmadge 2020).

Additionally, China's expanding overseas naval presence, including bases in Djibouti and port access agreements in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Pakistan, supports its far-seas energy corridor security strategy (Erickson and Strange 2016). These installations may serve dual purposes—commercial and military—enabling China to project force across key shipping lanes vital to its economy.

5) Strategic Implications for the Indo-Pacific

China's energy security imperatives have far-reaching implications for the regional order. They compel Beijing to pursue assertive diplomacy, infrastructure development, and military modernization—all of which intersect with U.S. efforts to contain its rise. As China fortifies its strategic depth and energy corridors, it also challenges U.S. maritime supremacy and raises tensions in an already contested region (Scobell and Beckley 2020).

Energy security, therefore, acts as both a driver and a flashpoint in the U.S.-China rivalry. While the U.S. aims to sustain control over key chokepoints and alliances, China is determined to neutralize vulnerabilities and assert itself as a secure and autonomous power. This duality ensures that the Indo-Pacific will remain a central theater in the geopolitical contest of the 21st century.

Comparative Analysis: QUAD vs A2/AD

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific has crystallized into two distinct but competing security frameworks: the U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy. While both frameworks serve different purposes and rely on varying means of exerting influence, their core objective remains the same—shaping the balance of power in a region vital to global trade, security, and energy flows.



1) QUAD: U.S.-led Multilateral Security Cooperation

The QUAD, comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, has emerged as a soft military coalition aimed at preserving a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Originally conceptualized in 2007 and revived in 2017, the grouping facilitates interoperability through joint naval exercises like Malabar, intelligence-sharing frameworks, and strategic coordination on maritime domain awareness (Smith 2021; Grossman and Hillman 2020).

The QUAD is not a formal alliance like NATO; rather, it operates as a flexible security dialogue platform, reflecting member states’ converging concerns over China’s assertiveness in the South and East China Seas, as well as its growing influence across the Indian Ocean (Medcalf 2020). The group emphasizes values such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and respect for territorial integrity—principles often perceived as being challenged by Beijing’s maritime activities.

However, the QUAD faces limitations in terms of cohesion and strategic clarity. India remains cautious about fully aligning itself with U.S. containment strategies against China due to its historical non-alignment and dependency on Russian defense systems (Brewster 2021). Australia and Japan, although closer allies of the U.S., also seek to avoid open confrontation with China, their major trading partner.

2) China’s A2/AD Strategy: Regional Military Denial Doctrine

In response to the perceived encirclement by QUAD and broader U.S. containment, China has refined and expanded its A2/AD strategy. This military doctrine seeks to prevent adversary forces, particularly the U.S. Navy, from operating freely within the First Island Chain—which includes Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea (Krepinevich 2010; Yoshihara and Holmes 2018).

China’s A2/AD capabilities include a combination of advanced missile systems (e.g., DF-21D and DF-26), modern air defense systems, electronic warfare units, cyber tools, and space-based intelligence platforms (Erickson 2017). These systems are designed to delay or deny an adversary’s access to key operational theaters, thus preserving Chinese freedom of action and complicating U.S. intervention during a crisis.

Artificial islands in the South China Sea—equipped with airstrips, surface-to-air missiles, and radar installations—further strengthen China’s A2/AD perimeter. These islands act as forward military outposts, enabling Beijing to extend its surveillance and operational range across contested waters (CSIS AMTI 2022).

3) Comparing Strategic Objectives and Capabilities

Aspect	QUAD	China’s A2/AD
Purpose	Maintain free and open Indo-Pacific, check Chinese expansion	Deter U.S. intervention, secure maritime periphery
Composition	U.S., Japan, India, Australia	China alone (with indirect support via BRI partners)
Military Tools	Naval drills, defense agreements,	Missile systems, electronic warfare, fortified islands



Geographic Focus	dialogues Entire Indo-Pacific, including IOR and Western Pacific	First Island Chain, especially South China Sea
Operational Strengths	Multilateral coordination, naval interoperability	Denial capabilities, strategic depth, local superiority
Limitations	Diverging national interests, India's ambivalence	Risk of overreach, diplomatic isolation, technology gaps

Implications for Regional Security

The QUAD emphasizes multilateralism, democratic norms, and shared regional interests but suffers from a lack of institutionalization and varying threat perceptions among its members. A2/AD, in contrast, is a unilateral and highly technical approach grounded in military denial, offering Beijing a means to contest maritime dominance while avoiding formal conflict (Liff 2018).

Together, these strategies represent two ends of the spectrum: cooperative security versus assertive denial. As the Indo-Pacific becomes more militarized, both frameworks risk reinforcing a security dilemma, where defensive measures are interpreted as aggressive, prompting further arms buildups and mistrust (Friedberg 2022).

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the epicenter of strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the 21st century. With its immense economic significance, critical sea lanes, and concentration of military assets, the region has become the central stage where the evolving power dynamics of global politics are playing out. This rivalry is not only about territorial claims or naval dominance but is fundamentally rooted in the pursuit of energy security, trade influence, and strategic depth.

The United States, through its support of regional allies and initiatives like the QUAD, seeks to uphold a rules-based international order, ensure freedom of navigation, and counter China's expanding influence. Its emphasis on strategic partnerships with India, Japan, and Australia, coupled with its network of naval bases and freedom of navigation operations, reflects a sustained commitment to remaining the dominant maritime power in the Indo-Pacific.

China, in response, has undertaken a holistic and multidimensional approach. It has bolstered its regional posture through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, aimed at securing alternate trade and energy routes. Simultaneously, it has heavily invested in naval modernization and A2/AD capabilities, demonstrating a shift from coastal defense to assertive power projection.

The competition between QUAD and A2/AD encapsulates the broader contest between multilateral cooperation and unilateral denial strategies. While QUAD represents a coordinated diplomatic and military effort to maintain balance, China's A2/AD seeks to reshape the security architecture by limiting external intervention and asserting regional autonomy.

Energy security remains a pivotal driver behind China's maritime behavior. Its vulnerability to U.S.-controlled chokepoints, especially the Strait of Malacca, has



Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

accelerated its efforts to diversify supply lines and secure strategic ports. This energy imperative is closely intertwined with its foreign policy and military doctrine in the region.

Ultimately, the trajectory of U.S.-China competition in the Indo-Pacific will depend on the ability of both powers to manage their rivalry responsibly. While strategic balancing is inevitable, the long-term stability of the region will rest on diplomacy, economic interdependence, and adherence to international norms. Without these, the risk of escalation—whether accidental or intentional—remains ever-present in the world's most contested maritime theater.

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Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

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Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

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Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

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