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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China Rise****Saleem T.M Azam** (Ph.D Candidate)

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic competition between the United States and China as their rise unfolds in the Indo-Pacific region through the lens of balance-of-power theory. The research addresses a gap by comparing the effectiveness of strategies of both rival powers and analysing current regional dynamics. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research uses data from online sources and government reports. The competition is driven by China's emergence as a global economic, military, technological, and political power. This emergence has altered the regional power structure, influenced global governance, and fostered new strategic partnerships based on economic interests. The international system is shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity, reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape. Chinese leaders characterise their country's rise as peaceful, referencing Confucian and Taoist philosophies of harmony and balance. Scholars note that China's assertive actions in the East and South China Seas have raised concerns among Indo-Pacific nations. In 2022, the United States introduced the Indo-Pacific Strategy to counter China's influence, yet this has not impeded China's ascent. China avoids confrontation, perceives the USIPS as containment, and continues to advance the Belt and Road Initiative. Neither the Belt and Road Initiative nor the Indo-Pacific Strategy has secured ASEAN's support, and neither power maintains complete influence in the region. Many scholars identify China as a rising power in the Indo-Pacific, while the United States is often viewed as a declining power, and its Indo-Pacific strategy is underestimated. Comparative analysis of the strategies indicates that China poses a challenge to US interests. Yet the United States remains a significant military presence, and its Indo-Pacific Strategy is effective in containing China.

Keywords: Strategic competition, Indo-Pacific strategy, Belt and Road Initiative, Rare earth elements.

Introduction

The United States of America and China are in strategic competition, driven by China's rise as a global economic, military, and political power that challenges US supremacy and intensifies competition in the Indo-Pacific region, (S. Singh 2026). The main thesis and gap in this research are to explore which power strategy is effective in containing each other's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Southeast Asia is the

hub of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. In the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, it is an incremental shift in the power paradigm and global governance and a transition from a unipolar order to a multipolar order. China is not only impacting the Indo-Pacific but also restructuring and reshaping the global economic system, posing a challenge to the US and regional states, including Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, which are concerned about China's assertive actions and maritime militarization, particularly in Southeast Asia. These states are alarmed by territorial disputes, fearing that Chinese dominance could establish a new economic and strategic order and control waterways, (Swadhin 2024).

The Indo-Pacific region is significant for both the United States and China because it has the fastest-growing economies and accounts for 60% of global GDP, and strategic straits such as the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz, (Girardi 2023). China is increasing its influence in the Indo-Pacific through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to revive its concept of the Middle Kingdom or 'One China' (Murphy 2026). This regional competition is intensified by the area's strategic importance, including key straits, abundant energy resources, and valuable rare earth metals. In the 21st century, rare earth metals have become as vital as hydrocarbon energy resources, making them essential to the region's economic and geopolitical landscape, (Othman 2026).

According to Alfred Thayer Mahan's 'Sea power theory,' power that controls the oceans and waterways will rule the world (Nguyễn 2024). Building on this perspective, China is enhancing its power in the Indo-Pacific waters to assert its leadership in global political dominance; this ambition is a root cause of strategic competition. China's influence in the East China Sea and South China Sea, and rising influence over the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), may provide China with the authority to impede and regulate norms, rules, and maritime traffic in the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, major powers are advancing with distinct grand strategies in the Indo-Pacific to increase their geopolitical influence, (Nguyễn 2024).

Kenneth Waltz, in his book 'International Structure,' characterizes the international order as anarchic and shaped by the distribution of capabilities. States behave according to their relative power, categorized as great, middle, or small powers. Great powers are primarily responsible for designing and establishing the international order based on their capabilities and influence. The United States administration perceives China as an emerging challenge to its geopolitical interests (do Vale 2025). In 'Theory of International Politics,' Waltz argues that states balance the power of opposing states by forming alliances to protect their vital and economic interests, (Waltz 1979).

China's rise as a rival power is challenging the unilateral liberal order established by the US and the West after World War II, (K. A. He 2026). China's emergence as the second global economic power in 2010 significantly changed the international system's hierarchy, (Tanrikut 2024). China's BRI infrastructure development strategy is impressive; it includes roads, railways, energy pipelines, and ports in Southeast Asia. The BRI is a path to influence and global trade connectivity. China's influence has grown because of its infrastructure development strategy, and it is also providing loans to developing states that are distant from the US and cannot obtain them from the World Bank and the IMF. China is balancing US influence by employing economic diplomacy to expand its trade alliances and naval presence in Southeast Asia. According to Joseph Nye, China is influencing Southeast Asia and Africa through its soft power, through trade, the BRI programme, and digital connectivity. The construction of a 5G system has

enhanced China's technological and economic influence in the partner states as a global power. (Lee 2025).

China's rise in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region is a challenge to the US's vital interests. In 2018, the National Defence Strategy, under President Trump, specified Russia and China as challenges to US interests, (Péczei 2018). In 2022, President Biden introduced the US Indo-Pacific strategy to neutralize China's power in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing a 'free and open Indo-Pacific.' The National Security Strategy (NSS) for the Indo-Pacific was introduced to contain China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region and maintain the free and open Indo-Pacific, (C.-p. Li 2023).

According to the US Department of War¹, China emerged as a challenge to the United States and modernized its arsenal. In response, President Joe Biden allocated \$849.8 billion to the official FY 2025 Defence Budget. This budget aims to modernize the military and support research and development. Reflecting these concerns, the United States administration views China as a serious existential challenge to US security and interests in the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, the US Indo-Pacific strategy involves building bilateral and mini-lateral strategic alliances—such as QUAD and AUKUS—with Indo-Pacific nations. The primary purpose of these alliances is to coordinate military preparedness, enhance intelligence sharing, and strengthen mutual defence commitments to contain China. Through this institutional framework, the US seeks to structure, align, and influence the regional states and encircle and contain China, (Tuckfield 2025).

The US Indo-Pacific strategy (USIPS) has intensified strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. China considers the USIPS a containment policy, while the US perceives China as a challenge to its interests in this region. The USIPS poses a challenge to China, but it has not deterred China's regional activities. China has expanded its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), yet it has not secured comprehensive support from Southeast Asian states nor diminished US influence. Both powers are avoiding direct conflict, while the US maintains a dominant presence in the region. The effectiveness of both powers depends on their respective strategies and the economic benefits they offer to ASEAN member states. The rival power that secures ASEAN states and gains favour is likely to gain regional influence.

Comparative analysis indicates that China poses an increasing challenge to US interests. Nevertheless, the United States remains a major military power in the region, and its Indo-Pacific strategy continues to be effective in containing China's rise.

Objective: The main aim of this research is to compare the efficacy of competing powers' strategies, i.e., the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's BRI Infrastructure Development Strategy. To examine the repercussions of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy on China's advancement in the Indo-Pacific region.

Materials and Methods

Methodology:

It is qualitative, descriptive research, and the analytical data were gathered from books, research papers, and government reports available online that support the research objective. The research was

¹ Department of Defense Releases the President's Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget

conducted in the context of the balance of power theory. Primary data were collected through interviews with professors at well-known universities in Islamabad, Pakistan.

Qualitative research techniques, as outlined by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln², were applied to data collection. Over two months, eight professors from prominent universities in Islamabad were interviewed individually for one hour each using structured, open-ended questions. The participants characterized China as a challenging power and the United States as a hegemonic military power that dominates the region through institutionally designed structures. They described China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an efficient global infrastructure development program that connects Asia, Europe, and Africa via the Silk Road, facilitating China's trade expansion to over 150 countries. They also noted China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific through trade and economic partnerships. In contrast, the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy was described as its strategic alliances, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership, as well as its extensive network of regional allies, including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and India. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy was regarded as effective because its soft-containment approach seeks to avoid direct conflict with China while strategically limiting China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region.

Result and discussion

Result: Qualitative data collected from research articles, books, and government reports, and primary data obtained through interviews, indicate that China is an emerging economic power. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to promote global connectivity, trade, and economic growth and has enhanced economic prosperity and strengthened China's trade partnerships. However, these gains have not enabled the BRI to surpass the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. In contrast, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (USIPS) adopts a defensive approach to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific and uphold the liberal international order. The US has supported this order, while China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK) promote a multilateral system through BRICS, SCO, and de-dollarization efforts. Through alliances, the US strategy limits China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, but it has not fully deterred or excluded China from the region.

Rising China as a Revisionist Power?

The US and China are in a strategic competition, and the Indo-Pacific is the centre of this competition. Some scholars view China as a revisionist power, and this raises the question: Who is the revisionist power? According to the definition, a revisionist power challenges the existing order and seeks to alter it in its favour. However, China is a rival power, but it is not a traditional revisionist power, because it is the beneficiary of the liberal order, (Hopewell, 2025).

In 2017, President Trump labelled China as a revisionist power in the National Security Strategy (NSS), RAND research highlights that China does not express a clear indication to amend or overturn the liberal order, because China is the beneficiary of the liberal system. China does not behave like the revisionist powers like Russia, Iran, and North Korea, but keeps a distance from these powers, though China has

² Denzin, N. K. (2008). *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (Vol. 2). Sage.

strong diplomatic relations with these powers. It raises a question: when China is the beneficiary, what's the problem?

In 2017, President Trump labelled China a revisionist power in the National Security Strategy (NSS), (McKechnie, 2017). RAND research highlights that China does not provide a clear indication to amend or overturn the liberal order, because it is the beneficiary of the liberal system. China does not behave like the revisionist powers like Russia, Iran, and North Korea, but keeps a distance from these powers, though China has strong diplomatic relations with these powers. While China is the beneficiary of the liberal system, it raises a question: what's the problem? (Kelly T. K., 2014).

The problem lies in China's behaviour and intentions. As it gains power, the state's behaviour and policy are changing. According to realism, states have a strong craving for power. When states gain power, they not only capture territory and resources but also seek to become hegemonic powers. According to Mearsheimer, powerful states possess power; they may become revisionists and challenge the status quo of the great powers. It is power and interest that motivate a state to change its policy and take a step toward power. Emerging China is a challenge to US interests in the Indo-Pacific and its rise as a rival power, (Mearsheimer, 2003).

China's rapid rise as a rival power is actively challenging the US-led liberal international order established after World War II, (do Vale 2025). By transforming the previously hierarchical structure of global power, China is the second-largest economic power and is influencing the framework of the international system. Structural realism, described by Kenneth Waltz in his 1979 book 'Theory of International Politics,' explains how the international order is shaped by the distribution of capabilities among states. In this system, states are categorized as great, middle, or small powers, and great powers act according to their relative influence and capabilities, (Quinn 2017).

According to Robert Gilpin, great powers establish order, rules, and norms and enforce them on weaker states. As a result, states are often contending for power, resources, land, mineral resources, and sea routes. In this context, great powers fight wars and establish rule to secure their vital interests. Moving to the 21st century, China emerged as a challenging power and sought to transform the liberal order and the current international system in its favour. To this end, China has developed its national power, as well as its economic and military capabilities, (Lind 2024).

Philosophy played a vital role in shaping society, culture, and the political system. Chinese leaders often describe their country's ascent as a peaceful rise, drawing on Confucian and Taoist philosophies of harmony and balance. However, scholars observe that China's increasingly assertive actions in the East and South China Seas have raised concerns among Indo-Pacific nations. (L. S. Li 2025).

It is China's ambition to influence the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, or the Indo-Pacific region. China's aim to rise and influence the Indo-Pacific region is its imperial legacy; China wants to regain its past glory, the notion of the Middle Kingdom on the earth. The idea of 'one Zhōngguó' means 'one China.' The Middle Kingdom mindset is the spirit that inspires the CCP leadership and the Chinese public to be united and build China into a great nation. The 'one Zhōngguó' notion legacy became the cause of national rejuvenation, and China embraced the republican idea of the People's Republic of China (PRC), (CHOUDHURY 2024).

Globally, China has initiated various development projects, and states are obliged and cooperative due to the investments and infrastructure development, (Maqsood 2024). Many states are emerging as

economic powers, such as the BRICS states (China, Russia, India, and Brazil), and they are leading the world towards a multipolar world order to balance the international system. China is seeking to lead the global south to play its role in the global world transformation, (Patrick 2025).

In Tianjin, China, the 25th SCO summit was held from 31 August to September 1, 2025. The summit was characterized as a platform for key members to express their apprehensions about the United States' policies. It's China's and Russia's great desire to organize a substitute bloc parallel to the Atlantic-centric global institutions in criticism of the United States' policies. Many heads of state attended the 25th SCO summit, such as those of Russia, Iran, Türkiye, North Korea, Belarus, and Pakistan. The leaders of different political systems and the regional heads' presence enhanced the significance of the summit. At the summit, President Xi Jinping addressed issues such as the Global Governance Initiative, supporting a new world order, and prioritizing the role of the 'Global South.' While, the Global South condemns hegemonic practices in geopolitics, (Savic 2025).

Great powers use economic means to control and subdue the weaker states. For example, to control the nuclear program, the Western powers used economic sanctions and military force to gain their objectives. China also used its finance, trade, and investment techniques to obtain its strategic interests and influence and rise globally. China pursued its vital interests by economic means in South Asia and Southeast Asia, (Wigell 2018).

China, as a revisionist power, wishes to change the liberal order established by the United States. China is establishing parallel institutions to the liberal institutions and challenges the international norms and governance. China's approach is pragmatic and rational in the international system; it is a double-pronged strategy. On one side, China is participating in the international system and getting the benefits of the liberal economic system and open market. On the other hand, it is establishing financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS Development Bank, and providing loans and funds, similar to those offered by the World Bank. China and the BRICS member states wish to replace the dollar through trade in the local currencies of the member states, (Mohamed 2024).

China has established institutions and strategies to transform the liberal order; these institutions lack approval and legitimacy, such as the UN and the World Bank. At least these Western institutions are formed with the approval of member states. This means that China is a revisionist, rising second global economic power, and this is the cause of anxiety for the US and Western powers, (Maqsood 2024).

China's BRI initiative and the Western powers in the Indo-Pacific Region

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a grand strategy that was initiated in 2013, (da Costa 2024).. President Xi Jinping introduced the BRI, which aims to promote connectivity and collaboration worldwide through infrastructure development and global trade. China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region increased due to its economic strategy; however, the rivalry between the US and China intensified as a result of China's enhanced presence in the Indo-Pacific region. On the economic front, different powers present in the Indo-Pacific, including European nations led by the European Union (EU), are pursuing their vital economic interests. The 'big four,' France, the UK, Germany, and Italy, are present in the region to enhance trade with the regional states; in the Indo-Pacific region, there are middle powers like the Netherlands and Sweden that are also present for economic benefit, and smaller powers like the Czech

Republic, Lithuania, and Ireland are looking to the region for economic opportunities, (Abbondanza 2025).

European powers' presence in the Indo-Pacific region supports the regional security structure with Japan and India and the US Indo-Pacific strategy of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific.' European powers can also support and enhance security and multilateral cooperation, (Brattberg 2019). France's military bases are located across the Indo-Pacific region, including Djibouti, La Réunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia. France's strategic military bases protect France's territories, providing protection and stability to the region, (Wacker 2021). The UK has permanent bases in Diego Garcia and Brunei, boasting robust naval capabilities, and is also a member of the US strategic alliance (AUKUS) and other multilateral organizations, (Puri 2024). Germany and Italy do not have permanent military bases, but they enhance their presence through multilateral exercises, such as the Rim of the Pacific and PASSEXs, (Wacker 2021). China is extending its BRI program in the Indo-Pacific region. The BRI is a global infrastructure development project, but it is also a strategic economic program to achieve its ambition of an assertive power in the Indo-Pacific region. China is obtaining multifaceted objectives and economic and political gains through the BRI program. China is connecting with the other parts of the world through its infrastructure development projects, including roads, railways, sea routes, and ports. Australia, India, Japan, and the US are QUAD countries that are containing the BRI through institutional and individual struggles, but the BRI is evolving in the region. However, QUAD states are employing the 'institutional balancing strategy' to constrain, change, and shape the Sino-BRI behaviour, (He 2021).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a complex, dual-faceted strategy that addresses both domestic development and global infrastructure expansion. As a regional and global initiative, the BRI has generated significant challenges and competition among major international powers. Unlike traditional regionalism, China's BRI strategy constitutes a distinct economic concept, (Ploberger 2019). The concept of new regionalism theory emerged in the Cold War and in the late 1990s. In contrast, earlier regionalism was confined to specific regions, such as the European Union, ASEAN, and the African Union. The BRI is considered global in scope and exceptional, as it extends beyond traditional regional boundaries, (Söderbaum, 2003).

In the Indo-Pacific region, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a key player, serving as the linchpin in regional politics and regionalism. It is challenging for ASEAN states to remain neutral and cooperative with rival powers. To navigate these challenges, ASEAN states currently pursue an impartial enmeshment strategy, defined as engaging with multiple major powers without aligning with any power, avoiding entanglement in their rivalry while gaining trade and economic benefits. Despite these dynamics, ASEAN's main focus remains on regional trade, cooperation, and further developing regionalism through this impartial enmeshment approach, (Yoshimatsu 2023).

China aims to establish itself as a global power and actively participate in global governance by leveraging its economic and military strength to restructure global governance. Its strategic vision is expansive, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serving as a global development project rather than a limited undertaking. China is focusing on Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific, especially Southeast Asia, to expand its trade. It is strengthening alliances and partnerships through trade and infrastructure projects, including port construction in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, (Hoque 2024).

In the 21st century, China's rise is widely acknowledged, marked by economic growth, military modernization, and an influential role in global geo-economic and political affairs. As a revisionist power in Asia, China is an active participant in the World Trade Organization and the United Nations, including the Security Council and peacekeeping operations. China's emergence directly challenges US dominance in global geopolitics, (Zarkachi 2023) .

Southeast Asia is the heart of the Indo-Pacific and a centre of global trade and strategic competition. China's economic influence is rising in Southeast Asia. As noted in the Federal Ministry of Austria Policy Brief No. 66, March 2025, China's BRI membership had reached over 149 countries out of 193 UN members by 2025. This expanding BRI membership highlights China's growing trade alliances and influence in the Indo-Pacific, supported by BRI infrastructure projects. As a result, the US and European powers are also stakeholders in the region and face new challenges and anxieties in the Indo-Pacific, (Urban 2025).

Region's Significance: Economic Growth, and Rare Earth Metals.

The Indo-Pacific region is a vast area encompassing the Indian Ocean and the western and central Pacific Ocean. It plays a significant role in the economic system; it is home to several of the largest economies, and militaries such as those of the US, China, Japan, and India are located in the region, (Jędrzejowska 2023). It contributes 65% of the world's population and 62% of the global GDP, (Rahman 2020). In 1920, a German, Karl Haushofer, first used the term 'Indo-Pacific.' Global powers took an interest in the Indo-Pacific region due to its rapid economic growth (H. Li 2022). Since 2007, strategic analysts and government officials have used the term 'Indo-Pacific' in policy documents and research. In 2011-2012, US President Obama initiated the Pivot to Asia policy. The term is also used in the 2017 National Security Strategy, (Sakka 2017), and in the future year 2025, the Indo-Pacific became an important part of the Foreign policy of the US, China, Japan, India, and Australia, (Aryal 2025). (Vinod Kumar 2023).

The Indo-Pacific is a significant region in the world because of its rapid economic growth and abundant natural resources. In 2021, Antony J. Blinken stated in Jakarta, Indonesia, that the US is an Indo-Pacific nation and that US security and prosperity are tied to this region. It is a market for one-third of the US exports and the commencement of \$900 billion in foreign direct investment, creating millions of jobs in the 50 states of America, (State.gov. 2021)

According to the FDI Intelligence report, published in April/May 2024, China's industrial manufacturing and investment have increased in the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region due to cheap labour and a regional supply chain. The ASEAN region's 660 million people benefited from China. China is a major investor and trading partner in Southeast Asia. The combined investment in the ten ASEAN states was \$3.3 trillion in 2021. Between 2022 and 2023, more than \$124 billion was promised to Greenfield foreign direct investment (FDI) for new brand manufacturing projects to be established in the ten ASEAN states. These manufacturing projects are a cause of lessening poverty and increasing job opportunities for both states, (FDIntelligence 2024).

According to the World Bank 2025 data, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam are developing states in the region. However, the economies of Thailand and Vietnam are growing due to growing trade and investment. In the Indo-Pacific region of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, economies are growing faster than the rest of ASEAN. These states are attracting trade and investment due to political stability, strategic trade agreements, and growth in high-tech and digital

industries, (bank 2025). The Andaman partner's trade report articulates that Southeast Asia is a vital destination for multinational companies. The combined GDP of the eleven states of Southeast Asia was 4 trillion, and in 2024, the total GDP growth rate was 4.6%, while the forecast for 2025 was 4.7%. In the region, Vietnam's exports are growing; its export value increased from 2010 to 2023, (partners 2025). The blue economy is substantial for the US, China, and regional states such as India, Japan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Australia. The Indo-Pacific region is noteworthy for global powers and regional states for maritime trade routes and the rare earth metals in the Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB). It is the world's richest ocean, containing polymetallic nodules, which means the ocean basin's rocks and sediments contain rare earth metals. It is generated naturally under the sea through hydrogenetic and diagenetic processes. The Indian Ocean is rich in minerals, with 5 kg/m² of nodules collected from the seafloor, containing 2% copper, nickel, and cobalt, (Bhuyan 2022).

China's Military Build-up

China's influence has increased due to its trade, economy, technology, and military capabilities. It has strengthened its domestic affairs, upgraded its strategies, and enhanced its influence in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2022, at the 20th Party Congress, President Xi Jinping amended the constitution and secured his third term in office. After Mao Zedong, President Xi is the most powerful leader in China. During his reign, China has emerged as a global economic and geopolitical leader, (Hossain 2024).

China's peaceful rise policy remained effective, and China was not involved in large-scale conflicts. Many multinational companies opened their business offices in China, such as Apple and Samsung. China established multiple industries and gained the advantage of a large population, resources, landscape, geography, and borders. China has capabilities in artificial intelligence and has built high-tech machines that function with artificial intelligence, (Hossain 2024).

China is manufacturing high-tech weapons, missiles, aircraft, ships, aircraft carriers, drones, laser drones, and hypersonic missiles, (Freedman¹ 2025). China exhibited its weapons on 3rd September 2025. China showcased a clear message that it has risen and can defend its boundaries and vital interests. China conducted a successful space weapons test in 2007, gained space capability, and further advanced its technology, (Tellis 2023). China's multinational companies are producing high-tech computer machines equipped with AI programming, such as cloud computing. Technology firms Baidu and other Chinese companies are producing AI (artificial intelligence) products used in the formation of satellites and military weapons, (Mick 2025).

China's policy is assertive in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and its territorial claim around the 'Nine-Dash Line' is part of its grand maritime security strategy. According to China's maritime grand strategy, China aims to protect the seas as a global maritime power. The South China Sea and East China Sea are important because they are a powerhouse, energy reservoir, fisheries, and economic interest, (Quyet 2023).

China's strategies are successful in the Indo-Pacific region; the BRI project is a strategic tool in China's foreign policy. China is building alliances with the small powers through infrastructure development projects. China's power is rising in the Indo-Pacific region, which is a source of anxiety for the US, Western powers, and regional powers. In 2017, Donald Trump saw the rising threat from China and turned his focus from the Global War on Terror to the Indo-Pacific. China revealed its defence strategy in its official report, 'China's National Defence in the New Era.' China is extending its defence ties with

the Shanghai Cooperation Council and strategic partnerships with forums like the China-ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting and also bilateral strategic relations with South Asian states, such as Pakistan, (Hossain 2024).

China has enhanced its weapons capability over time and also increased its military budget. Currently, there is the highest dedicated leadership in the CCP and PLA, and President Xi is leading a committed team of PLA members to advance the People's Liberation Army (PLA) militarily with modern weapons to defend its borders. In 2018, a Type 15 tank was installed in Tibet. China enhanced its air force by developing the stealth aircraft, the J-20. China strengthened its naval force and, in 2016, commissioned 18 ships, more than the US Navy, which commissioned five ships. China also enhanced its nuclear weapons; in 2019, China had 290 warheads, and by 2030, China will have enhanced them by more than 1000. China is also interested in increasing hypersonic missiles. In 2020, China initiated 300 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). In 2021, China successfully tested a hypersonic glide vehicle, which can travel 21,600 miles, (Hossain 2024).

China has increased its military budget annually, with a ten percent rise observed from 2000 to 2016. According to 2022 Statista data, the United States leads in military expenditure, allocating USD 877 billion. China ranks second with a military budget of USD 292 billion. India allocates USD 81 billion, Japan and South Korea each spend USD 46 billion, and Australia allocates USD 32 billion. China's military budget surpasses that of other regional states, contributing to heightened rivalry and perceived threats among regional and global powers, (Lawler 2023).

According to 2024 Statista data, the US military budget is USD 997 billion, which is the highest in the world. In the world, China is the second-largest state, spending USD 314 billion on its military budget; Russia is the third-largest state, spending USD 149 billion on its military budget. In 2024, the budget for the US Air Force was USD 260 billion, (Statista 2024).

According to the China Ministry of Defence 2025 information, China is very committed to safeguarding its territory, people, and national political security, and made a claim on Taiwan and a claim to suppress the separatist movements in Tibet and East Turkistan. China protects its maritime rights and interests, outer space, electromagnetic space (laser and microwave particles), cyberspace, and overseas interests. China also defends and protects the Senkaku Islands and strongly claims the South China Sea and East China Sea. In the region, there are many neighbouring states making claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea, but China has adopted an assertive policy to protect its vital interests in the Indo-Pacific, (Defense. 2025).

The Indo-Pacific Strategy a Response to China Rise

The United States has had longstanding strategic and commercial interests in the Indo-Pacific region, dating back over two centuries. The pursuit of commercial opportunities abroad has deep historical roots; the US intensified its regional engagement after World War II, as a superpower, building alliances with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and other countries. The establishment and continued presence of US military bases reflect the enduring strategic significance the region holds for the US, (House. 2022). Diplomatic, trade, and investment ties were also developed with ASEAN, (Yoon 2022).

According to President Yoon Suk Yeol's remarks at the ROK-ASEAN Summit (November 11, 2022), the Indo-Pacific region is inhabited by 65% of the world's population, and it accounts for 60% of global GDP,

2/3 of financial growth, and half of the international maritime trade (Yoon 2022). The Indo-Pacific region is important to all stakeholders: Australia, Japan, India, Korea, China, the Southeast Asian states, European Union states, and the United States. The United States cannot ignore the strategic and economic vitality of the Indo-Pacific region. In 2022, the US received \$2 trillion through trade and \$956 billion in foreign direct investment, with its economic policy focused on increasing profit through trade. The United States is an Indo-Pacific nation, and its security and prosperity are connected to the region, (House. 2022).

China is rising and enhancing its influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Southeast Asia is the centre of competition between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region. China has increased its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its strategic tool to achieve its strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. China is building infrastructure in Southeast Asian states, like roads, railways, and seaports. China is building ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. In East Asia, China is investing in a railway system to connect with Southeast Asia, (Blanchard 2024) .

The United States and China are engaged in strategic competition, and some scholars contend that China is surpassing the United States in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Although China's influence is increasing through global infrastructure initiatives, empirical evidence suggests that the United States continues to hold a hegemonic position in the Indo-Pacific region. These two states exemplify traditional great power competition, marked by competitive coexistence. At present, the United States remains both an economic and military leader, maintaining a stable economy and consistent geopolitical influence, while China is recognized as a rising power, (Shambaugh 2018). The United States possesses a larger military, operates more than 750 military bases across 80 countries, and upholds liberal institutions that play a significant role in the international system. Furthermore, the United States exerts global influence not only through military capabilities but also through its liberal institutions and soft power, distinguishing it from China, (Saleem 2023).

In 2022, the Biden administration launched the US Indo-Pacific Strategy; it states that the US is dedicated to advancing the 'free and open' Indo-Pacific. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy upholds freedom, connectivity, resilience, and prosperity. According to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), the US will contribute and strengthen its power and strategy for a 'free and open Indo-Pacific.' However, since it cannot be controlled or carried out by a single state, the US initiated strategic minilateral and bilateral alliances with regional powers, such as QUAD and AUKUS, to balance China's rise. This is also a part of the plan to empower the regional states to contain the rising power of China in the Indo-Pacific region. States that cooperate strategically and have similar goals are included in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, (House, 2022).

The objectives of the US Indo-Pacific strategy

To promote a free, open, connected, resilient, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region and contain China through alliances.

To protect American citizens, homeland, prosperity, and way of life;

To protect the US and its allies' interests in the Indo-Pacific region³.

The U.S Counter Strategy

³ The US Indo-Pacific strategy.2021-2025 Archived content. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/indo-pacific-strategy>

The United States employs aggressive tariffs and transactional diplomacy, targeting allies, partners, and rivals alike. The US uses tariffs as a diplomatic tool and pre-emptive weapon to enforce trade negotiations and address security issues, imposing tariffs on the steel and aluminium industries for national security reasons.

President Trump uses the tariff approach to restructure global trade, reduce the economic deficit, and secure favourable trade deals to make America great again. The US strategy evolved from the 'Asia-Pacific/Pivot to Asia' to the Indo-Pacific framework to counter China's rise between 2010 and 2025. Importantly, the Indo-Pacific became a key priority for President Obama, and this focus was further enforced and solidified by subsequent US administrations, (Zeng 2021).

The region's significance stems from its location near the Strait of Malacca, rare earth metals, and oil. Specifically, President Obama launched the Pivot to Asia-Pacific initiative in 2012. To increase US influence and facilitate free trade, he also outlined the US security strategy for the East Asia Pacific region. Building on this groundwork, Presidents Trump and Biden reinforced the National Security Strategy (NSS) for the Indo-Pacific region. In 2022, President Biden unveiled a plan for a 'free, open, prosperous, and resilient Indo-Pacific.' Notably, China's rise in the Indo-Pacific area has remained a driving force behind the development of a successful containment strategy and the formation of alliances with Indo-Pacific countries to counterbalance China's growing influence. For example, QUAD and AUKUS are two instances, (Waso 2025).

The United States, as a global superpower, has consistently prioritized the Indo-Pacific and China. Between 2001 and 2009, President George W. Bush strengthened relations with East and South Asian countries, including China, Japan, and India, in recognition of these regions' increasing significance. President Barack Obama introduced the 'Pivot to Asia' policy, highlighting the strategic importance of the region. From 2009 to 2013, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton further underscored the 'Pivot to Asia,' emphasizing the region's central role in US trade, economic growth, and diplomatic engagement. The Trump administration's 'Strategic Framework' seeks to promote a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific through public diplomacy and partnerships with Thailand, the Philippines, and other regional states, (Cooper 2024).

The United States expanded its ties with nations in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as well as with India and the Marshall Islands. To maintain its influence in the Indo-Pacific, the US has expanded trade ties with these nations; however, China's economic development initiatives are evolving rapidly in the region. The US administration followed Biden's 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy as a progressive step to extend US diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region. China is a strategic partner, and the US wants to enhance its diplomatic relations with China. Several US secretaries of state and presidents visited China over the years. Hillary Clinton visited China in 2011 and 2012, and Senator John Kerry visited China between 2013 and 2016. US President Obama visited China in 2014 for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit and in 2016 for the G20 Summit. To preserve friendly ties, Secretaries of State Rex Tillerson, Mike Pompeo, and Antony Blinken travelled to China between 2017 and 2023, (Cooper 2024) .

In 2025, the cause of competition between the two powers is to influence the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Southeast Asia. The reasons influencing this are strategic straits, rare earth minerals, and rapid economic growth. The US, China, and other stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific cannot ignore the

region's rapid growth, which is a cause of strategic competition. According to the book 'Xi Jinping's Quest for a Sino-centric,' China will be the focal point of Asia's geopolitics as part of President Xi's plan to rebuild the continent. China developed its foreign policy to accomplish its objectives through an Asia-Pacific grand strategy, (Rozman 2025).

In mid-October 2025, tensions between the United States and China escalated significantly as both countries imposed major tariffs on each other's goods. President Trump introduced tariffs on Chinese imports to disrupt China's trade, prompting China to criticize the 100% tariff and respond with export restrictions on rare earth metals. China added 12 of 17 rare earth elements, which are vital for electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels, missiles, computers, stealth aircraft, and radar systems, to its export control list. President Trump then announced plans to consider export controls on software and cancel a scheduled meeting with President Xi Jinping after November 1, 2025. The United States and China remain engaged in strategic competition for regional and global influence. China is expanding its presence in the Indo-Pacific through the Belt and Road Initiative and infrastructure development, while the United States aims to contain China's influence through its Indo-Pacific Strategy, (High 2025).

The US and China are competing for influence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in Southeast Asia, by strengthening economic and military ties. Both countries are increasing defence spending to enhance their hard power. In 2020, China's GDP was \$14.7 trillion, the second globally, with a defence budget of \$252 billion. China's stable geography, population, and political institutions support its continued economic growth (Review 2026). According to the 2025 World Population Review, the US military budget in 2020 was \$778 billion. The US remains the leading global power due to its military capabilities and stable economy. In 2024, US GDP reached \$28.78 trillion (Review 2026). World Population Review data confirms the US leads in military spending, with China ranking second⁴, (Reviewe 2026).

US-Israel war on Iran Relevance to the Region Dynamics.

Scholars critically assess the causal relationship between the Indo-Pacific Strategy and regional dynamics, as well as the implications of China's BRI for Beijing's global ambitions. The analyst applies multiple theoretical frameworks to examine the US-China conflict hypothetically. In contrast, Operation 'Epic Fury' against Iran offers empirical evidence that major powers are strategically contesting control over oil, sea straits, rare earth minerals, and trade routes. China leverages the BRI, spanning 150 countries, to reinforce economic ties with its partners. The US initiated the Indo-Pacific Strategy and established alliances such as QUAD and AUKUS to counter China's influence, (Steff 2025). Operation 'Epic Fury,' launched by the US and Israel on 28th February 2026, targets Iran's strategic capabilities, nuclear infrastructure, and oil resources. Notably, the conflict demonstrates the integration of AI, drones, and missiles by all sides; Iran's Shahed drones, undetected by Israeli radar, highlight advances in unmanned warfare, (Sabbagh 2026).

It's not only a violent action to change regimes in Venezuela and Iran, but it also prevents China from establishing a lasting strategic military and economic presence in Latin America and West Asia. This aligns with US policy to limit the oil supply and prevent China from getting discounted oil from Venezuela and Iran, (al-Halabi 2026).

⁴ Military Spending by Country 2026. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/military-spending-by-country>

China and Russia actively support Iran to advance their strategic economic interests. Both countries provide diplomatic backing and intelligence sharing to Iran to balance power. This directly counters the influence of the United States and Israel. However, China and Russia deliberately avoid direct involvement in the conflict. By extending clear diplomatic support to Iran, they safeguard their oil and energy interests. According to the UN report, China and Russia, as the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council⁵, ⁶they decisively veto resolutions concerning the Strait of Hormuz. China and Russia also categorically condemn military action against Iran. This strong international support from both states challenges U.S. hegemony and the liberal international order, instead promoting a multipolar global system. After the United States economic sanctions on Iranian oil exports, China emerged as the primary purchaser of Iranian oil, with approximately 80% of its oil imports sourced from Iran, (Khatinoglu 2026).

The United States and Israel seek to exert influence over the Gulf region and to control Iranian oil reserves. However, the resilient military capabilities of Iran make it difficult for the United States and Israel to achieve complete control, while Iran also faces significant challenges in overcoming these adversaries, (Council 2026). During the conflict, Iran blocked the Strait of Hormuz, resulting in a financial and global energy crisis. The Strait of Hormuz serves as a critical chokepoint for the oil trade, linking the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea. It facilitates the transport of more than 20% of global oil and gas, with Asian countries being more reliant on the Strait for oil transportation than the United States and Europe, (Singh 2026). After the United States lifted sanctions on Russia, Russia regained prominence as an oil supplier to various countries worldwide. (Mitchell 2026).

Scholars worldwide argue that the United States and China are engaged in a strategic competition for control over oil resources and key maritime straits. The conflict referred to as 'EPIC Furry' highlighted the significance of these straits for oil transportation. This emphasizes that oil remains a fundamental industrial activity. China's industrial sector is especially dependent on oil imports and secure transit routes. The Strait of Malacca and the Hormuz are therefore vital not only to China but also to global energy security. As a result, China is developing ports across the Indo-Pacific region. It is also expanding its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects internationally. Conversely, the United States aims to counter China's influence by limiting its access to oil resources and economic opportunities in the region. It does this through the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF), (Dei 2025). Furthermore, the United States is strengthening its presence in South America, Venezuela, the Middle East, and West Asia, (Conversion 2026).

Due to Pakistan's, China's, and Turkey's diplomatic efforts, the war between Iran and the US-Israel was stopped. Pakistan played a key role as a facilitator and mediator in stopping the war and in reconciliation. On 11th April 2026, Pakistan organized negotiations between the US and Iran, and through backchannel diplomacy, both sides agreed to a 14-day truce in the Middle East. However, the conflict between Iran and the US-Israel will take a few months to resolve peacefully.

Conclusion

⁵ Security Council: Russia and China veto resolution on Strait of Hormuz. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/04/1167261>.

⁶ How China is Securing Its Alliance with Iran's New Power Structure.by Dr Nadia Helmy

Literature and primary data illustrate that the US and China are engaged in strategic competition for influence in the Indo-Pacific, with Southeast Asia at the centre of this rivalry. The region is important to both powers due to its growing economies, strategic maritime routes, and valuable mineral resources, including oil and rare earth metals. Oil remains vital to geopolitics and industrial growth, while rare earth metals are increasingly critical for technology and military applications, weapons, radars, stealth aircraft, electric vehicles, batteries, and solar panels. Both the US and China seek economic advantage in the Indo-Pacific through access to trade and resources. As China expanded its influence in Southeast Asia, the US responded in 2022 with President Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy (USIPS) to promote a free, open, and liberal regional order. Comparative analysis of the BRI and USIPS strategies underscores their significance in shaping the region.

China and the United States have adopted distinct strategies in the Indo-Pacific. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) now includes over 150 countries, advancing global connectivity and economic integration. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) seeks to limit China's influence by strengthening alliances and increasing oversight of Chinese projects, focusing on economic and security networks to protect US and allied interests. The US remains strong due to its robust economy and military. Analyzing US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific helps practitioners, policymakers, and researchers develop informed policies, understand the rivalry, and manage competition peacefully. While the BRI promotes connectivity and trade, the USIPS aims to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific and uphold the liberal order. There is a need to reform policies and strategies to allow states to trade and extract minerals without conflict.

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