
Great-Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific: U.S.–China Strategic Competition, Alliance Networks, and Pakistan’s Hedging Dilemma

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region has become the main theatre of the new great power competition, as the United States is making sure that the region maintains a rules-based order while China leverages its economic power, technological capabilities, and maritime dimensions into its strategies. The geopolitics, the institutional mechanisms and the region's implications of U.S.–China competition is explored, and focus is paid to alliance networks, maritime chokepoints, economic architecture and the strategic dilemmas of middle powers. Based on qualitative content analysis of secondary sources, the study explains the conflict competition in terms of realism theory, power transition theory, Thucydides Trap and Rimland geopolitics. It has identified the competition is increasingly driving across military, economic, diplomatic, technological and infrastructural fields and that regionals are adopting “strategies of differentiation” of alignment, autonomy, and hedging. The Middle Eastern country with a tense relationship with India, feelings of dependency on CPEC and historical linkages with the USA is certainly Pakistan. The piece concludes that hedging –exercised in calibrated fashion still continues to be the most prudent measure that Pakistan can take today.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific; U.S.–China Rivalry; Great-Power Competition; Strategic Alliances; Belt and Road Initiative; Pakistan; Strategic Hedging

Introduction

Today the Indo-Pacific is the main arena for great power battle given that it is home to the lifelines of sea trade, energy, technology, military forces, and great power conceptions of order. The U.S.-China Relationship is not just competing against one another, it's competing against divided sides in terms of rules and institutions, routes and partnerships and technology strategies. The result of strategic competition can be accommodation, or confrontation and war. The biggest and most obvious illustration of all is the Cold War, and the end of the Soviet regime left America with unipolar hegemony and a new international system of power (Yllmaz, 2008; James & Imai, 1996).

Following September 2001 the United States of America expended significant resources in counterterrorism and crisis management. China, on the other hand, emphasized economic modernization, industrial growth, business integration, infrastructure investment, technology development, military modernization. This separation allowed Beijing to build up its economic muscle and then to translate this into political influence and military power (Oakley & Proctor, 2012; “China's Search for Military Power,” n.d.). The rise of China is bringing the issue of power transition back to the discussion since it may have the potential to change the international hierarchy and the dynamics of power games.

The region of the Indo Pacific is a geopolitical region that connects the Indian and Pacific oceans. It links trade routes, naval deployments, energy corridors, alliances and security concerns across eastern Africa, through maritime southeast Asia to the western Pacific (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Haruko, 2020). The Rimland theory still holds true due to the geographical, industrial, strategic, and chokepoint importance of the area. It is important because it creates "flows" or movements of energy, goods, data, capital and military power (Spykman, 2011; “The Battle for Resource Rent,” n.d.).

Interdependence in economics makes it more of a competitive game. China, India, Japan, etc. are Asian economies dependent on shipping lanes for their energy, resources and market access. There are also commercial interests in the U.S. and freedom of navigation in the United States with a navy presence. The Indo-Pacific is an engine of prosperity and a zone of vulnerability—as well as a place where disruption of sea lanes, ports, chokepoints or supply chains would have global repercussions and where networks of shared gains can become a tool of coercion (Furse, 2023; Joseph, 2015; Katada, 2025; Saeed, 2017).

Converted, the term “Asia-Pacific” is no longer used, and “Indo-Pacific” is now being used to give India, and the Indian Ocean, a greater significance; it also serves as a platform for alliances and partnerships. These mechanisms of Washington's reinforcement are alliances & minilateral arrangements, military defence cooperation, economic cooperation, and diplomacy. The Japanese vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and India becoming a maritime partner has been at the heart of this shift (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020; Wilkins, 2023; Medcalf, 2018). For all administrations strategic access, credibility of alliances, economic power and the ability to set regional agenda continue to be the fundamental U.S. goal (Taimoor et al., 2025; Hu, 2022).

There have been concerns of confrontation from aversions to violence. The “Thucydides Trap” emphasises the situation where fear, mistrust, alliance pledges and deployments can result in an “unwanted” collision between both sides. History is not a prediction, but it demonstrates how the struggle over access to and dominance of the sea, technology, supply chains, alliances, and influence can have a snowball effect. Although the U.S. and China are economically interdependent, they are also competitively strategic, thus creating an environment of cooperation, deterrence, and vulnerability (Pei, 2014; Hanania, 2021; Lee, 2019).

A useful framework is the realism. Offensive realism would account for the United States' alliances, military deployments, technological measures and diplomacy as a way of maintaining regional primacy. But China's actions are pragmatic and defensive. Beijing aims to expand its influence while claiming many measures to be necessary for the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity, trade routes, national security, among others (Charrette & Sterling-Folker, 2013; Fong, 2023; Johnston, 2013; Raditio, 2015). Its reaction integrates a mix of themes from the Belt and Road Initiative, military modernization, technology investment and other ideas of security, though defensive steps are often characterized as assertive moves (Paul, 2016; ZHANG, 2006; Gulley et al., 2018; Wu, 2021).

The regional states are no puppets of Washington or Beijing. Asians including India, Japan, ASEAN members and South Korea have different interests in terms of autonomy and preferences. Some strengthen their security ties with the United States and trade with China, and others do not align formally. However, emerging order is subject to selection, hedging and cooperation on issues, not to blocs (He & Feng, 2020; He, 2018). The United States has institutionalized this approach with its Quad and AUKUS and through the

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) (Bradford & Emmers, 2024; AUKUS, 2023; Taqfir, 2025); lack of regional enthusiasm for outright containment hedges unity and cohesion (Scott, 2012; Wojczewski, 2016; He & Feng, 2020).

Geography and Power rivalry with China, Economy, and India's importance. Defence deals have contributed to improvements in logistics, communication, sharing of intelligence and also to interoperability with the U.S. but yet New Delhi is not convinced about losing its strategic independence (Malik, 2016; Mehveen & Abid, 2022; Hameed et al., 2025; Nisar & Даниш, 2023). The conflict and subsequent events over the 1962 Indo-China war and the subsequent tussle between India & China at Galwan have exacerbated the mistrust between the two countries and have made the Quad partnership more cordial, both states have their incentives to avoid escalation (Rubin, 1960; Kumar, 2020).

The competition games out into the Middle East at the level of energy, infrastructure, tech, and who's helping whom. The I2U2 format links the Indo-Pacific countries – India, Israel, UAE, US – with the planned objectives of the Indo-Pacific region, and China's partnership with the Gulf countries and Iran further entices a linkage between both regions (Devi & Singh, 2025; Olimat, 2023). Moreover, the China–Iran–Russia axis limits Washington because Iran is located near other areas of critical importance for regional security, possesses energy amenities, and runs a nuclear programme that links Iran to great-power rivalry (Kamel, 2018).

Pakistan's position is very ambiguous. It has a long track of cooperation with the United States and the strategic cooperation with China is through CPEC. Sticking to one specific pattern is not an affordable option for the U.S. and India. Pakistan needs to safeguard its diplomatic and economic relationship with others while maintaining friendly ties with China (Ali, 2015; Malik, 2016). Finding the optimal solution involves selective cooperative action, multiple partnerships, and not aligning with any permanent commitment. However, it calls for economic strength and stability, institutional capacity, policy continuity and intensified development of CPEC and Gwadar based projects and initiatives (Markkanen & Schröder, 2010).

In this article, Somers countenances how the spectre of power change, maritime technique, alliance bows, and contending regional visions colour the U.S. – China rivalry and curtail Pakistan's options. It contains a message that the Indo-Pacific is not a traditional Cold War style clash and that it is based on a networked competition via infrastructure, military presence, technology and economic statecraft as well as diplomacy. The wisest decision for Pakistan is to take a steps back relief with a back-up plan of economic restructuring, multi-faceted ties, and safeguarding core national interests, which is otherwise called as calibrated hedging.

Literature Review

The knowledge economy surrounding the Indo-Pacific has grown quickly because of the rise of the Chinese superpower and a U.S. change in strategic policies, as well as the increasing significance of maritime Asia in global politics. The literature provides multiple lines of inquiry into the region, with each of these perspectives overlapping and offering overlapping elements. There are multiple lines of literature that address the region, each of these lines providing overlapping elements and lines of inquiry, and some overlapping at all. While opinions vary on whether this newly formed competition is reminiscent of another Cold War, it is generally accepted that Indo-Pacific has been the key battleground where the new distribution of global power is being fought.

Power Transition and the Structural Basis of Rivalry

A major strand of literature interprets U.S. – China competition in terms of shifts in the distribution of power in the world. The post-Cold War world and the demise of the Soviet Union resulted in the United States becoming the primary global player in a hardly bipolar world. It was a player of immense political and military, economic and institutional sway by which it influenced post-Cold War order in relationship to

the rules and practices set. But the literature on strategic competition claims unipolarity is hard to maintain when a new state acquires enough economic and technological strength to jeopardize the dominant state on its relative advantages position (James & Imai, 1996, Yllmaz, 2008).

So the rise of China is not just a matter of policy clash between two states, but a structural transformation. Its greater capacity to shape global outcomes has been greatly enhanced by its economic growth, industrial shift, technological investment and greater involvement in global governance. Apart from concerns of economic strength turning into military strength or ambitions, there is also a concern in Washington that the economic power might one day be transformed into economic leverage, institutional influence, and other avenues of global leadership (Duggan, 2014; Paul, 2016; ZHANG, 2006).

This is particularly significant since the Power Transition theory emphasizes the conflict that occurs as a challenger presents itself to the threshold of a dominant power's capabilities. It involves no assumption that wars are inevitable, but states that instability could be higher as a rising power looks for something missing in the established one, and in turn, the established power looks for ways to defend its privilege. Practically, China's rise has now further galvanized American fears regarding military balance as well as standards, rules and regulations of trade, infrastructure, technology, access to the seas and international institutions (Kim & Gates, 2015; Shiffrinson, 2018).

The threat posed by a structural confrontation between established and emerging powers is also reflected in the literature on the "Thucydides Trap". While historical analogy is uncomfortable to use determinatively, it serves as a way to raise awareness of the dangers of fear and misperception, pledging with allies, and creating security dilemmas. The issue is the potentially self-confirming nature of strategic competition: what acts one side takes to boost security could be viewed by the other as its preparation for domination or its containment. Even though the parties do not start out in conflict, this may lead to confrontation occurring during this process (Hanania, 2021; Lee, 2019; Pei, 2014).

Realism and Competing Conceptions of Security

Much of the literature on the Indo-Pacific uses realism as the over-arching theory. In the realist perspective states are assumed to be pursuant of security in an anarchical international system. They have no central control which can ensure their survival and so states gain power, forge alliances, secure strategic routes and respond to threats which might arise. The Indo-Pacific competition from this lens is not so abnormal as to surprise people, but is a logical product of evolving capabilities and unclear intent (Charrette & Sterling-Folker, 2013).

Offensive realism offers an understanding of the American desire to maintain regional dominance. The presence of the USA's military force, alliance pyratization, operations on the principles of freedom of navigation, technological partnerships and institutional projects can be read as ways to prevent the establishment of a Chinese regional dominance. The Quad, for instance, is an organisation that aims at expanding and transforming due to worries that China's capabilities will impede the current power dynamic and decrease the USA's influence in the region of maritime Asia (Fong 2023).

Defensive realism by contrast provides a perspective into the issue of Chinese sovereignty, territoriality, maritime security and the safeguards of trade routes. Chinese activity is often considered assertive, especially with regard to the South China Sea and Taiwan. But others say that there are also defensive elements which Beijing has followed in their policies, such as its fear of being surrounded, reliance on fragile sea-lanes, and vulnerability to military challenges from outside China. China's activities can thus be viewed as an attempt to reduce vulnerability while also having strategic intentions (Johnston 2013; Raditio 2015).

This distinction is important, as it shows that a security dilemma is in operation. An American alliance or deployment of troops might be wave one in stabilising China and containment is how China may see it. Likewise, China can say that its military modernization is for the purpose of self-defense, whereas

neighbouring nations can see it as proof of China's expansionism. The consequence is an escalation of both sides viewing what they do as defensive, and the other side's actions as threatening.

The Indo-Pacific as a Geopolitical Construction

The concept of the "Asia-Pacific" to the "Indo-Pacific" is another strand of literature that has been explored. The commentators overwhelmingly believe the Indo-Pacific is not a mere geographical term. It is a strategic infrastructure that unites the Indian and Pacific Oceans into one political, economic and security area. The concept stresses the recognition that maritime transport, energy pipelines, naval operations, security concerns, and military alliances in or towards the subregions of the region can no longer be considered on their own (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Haruko, 2020).

This aspect of the change of names also shows geopolitical implications. While it's true that the Asia-Pacific framework paid more attention to East Asia and the western Pacific, the Indo-Pacific does more to give India and the Indian Ocean a central role. This wider context enables the representation of India in the regional strategic planning, and reinforces the linkage between American's alliances in the Pacific and partnerships in South Asia and Indian Ocean region (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020; Medcalf, 2018).

Classical geopolitical thinking is still applicable. Spykman's Rimland theory focuses on the significance of coastal areas around Eurasia. The Indo-Pacific is home to significant population hubs, industrial economies, sea-choke points, energy corridors, and strategic resources. So control or influence over these spaces can then have an impact on wider power relations and inequalities in the world. It is a legacy of that geographical link between access to the sea, geopolitics, and political power; and it is something which is strongly reflected in the competition which is now unfolding in the Indo pacific (Spykman, 2011).

The literature is also ample of stress placed on the significance of maritime trade. Importing energy, raw materials and exporting products are a primary mode of transport for major economies in Asia. The United States also interests in the region in terms of trade and security. As a result, freedom of navigation, freedom of port call, sea-lane protection, and control of maritime chokepoints have emerged as key aspects of strategic planning (Yoshihara, 2015; Saeed, 2017; Furse, 2023).

Alliance Networks and Minilateral Security Arrangements

One of the preeminent themes of the literature is that of the changing nature of the American alliance system. The traditional hub-and-spokes structure, which relied on bilateral alliances, has increasingly been complemented by multilateral, smaller triple and mini-four/6 alliances. They aim to enhance coordination, sharing, technology co-operation, chain resilience and interoperability between different networks, as well as to help address regional issues (Wilkins, 2023).

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is the most obvious example. The Quad was originally linked to humanitarian efforts after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami but gradually was extended to include a political and strategic forum. According to the literature, the Quad is not in fact a new alliance, but it does note the concerns the quad countries share with the development, including with regard to maritime security, regional stability, infrastructure, technology and China's influence. In addition to maritime drills, its scope has latched on to health security, climate change, supply chains and technological co-operation (Bradford & Emmers, 2024; Mohan & Govella, 2022).

Some of the arms and tech sharing (AUKUS) is deeper defence cooperation. The importance of technological advantage in Indo-Pacific competition is underlined by its emphasis on nuclear-powered submarines, information-sharing, science, industrial integration and enhanced defence capabilities. The pact is designed to boost Australia's military capabilities in the longer-term and enhance strategic partnership between Australia, UK and US. Meanwhile, AUKUS has brought about "political tension" with some European stakeholders due to their concerns about military power and arms competition, according to the literature (Calugaru, 2023).

The I2U2 framework takes Indo-Pacific cooperation one step further by extending it to a group of nations comprising India, Israel, the UAE and the USA. While it aimed to be an economic and technological forum, it also staked a claim to tying Middle Eastern alliances more closely to broader American strategic interests. Its importance is not reduced by the fact that it reflects a convergence of interests at a number of levels that are crucial for Middle Eastern energy politics, Indian economic aspirations, and Israeli technological strengths; and yet, American efforts to mitigate China's influence. It's important because of its multi-faceted convergence of interests Middle Eastern energy politics, Indian economic aspirations, Israel's technological strengths, and American attempts to stall China's influence—are often crucial (Devi & Singh, 2025).

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is the economic component of America's engagement. It concentrates on trade, supply chains, infrastructure, clean energy, tax and anti-corruption. The framework includes an acknowledgment that military alliances are not alone sufficient for regionally influencing activities. It is essential to invest in economic projects to address criticisms that the Belt and Road Initiative is offering China more infrastructure, investment and connectivity than the U.S. is offering. Economic projects are required in order to cater to concerns that the U.S. cannot match the advantages of infrastructure, investment and connectivity that the BRI will provide to China.

China's Response and the Belt and Road Initiative

Many publications on China's regional policy stress upon the importance of economic connectivity. Through BRI, China has managed to grow its business, finance, diplomatic and infrastructure footprint over Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. The interpretation of the BRI as more than just an economic project is as a broader, strategic mechanism to diminish dependency on current lines, improve partnerships and boost influence on the development of the region (Taeuber, 2020; Sutter, 2023).

China's reliance on sea trade has been a frequent topic. The Strait of Malacca is significant due to a significant proportion of Chinese energy imports and commercial traffic travelling through the strait. This fact is part of the so called Malacca Dilemma as there is an alternative possibility that this route could be prevented by an adversary. Chinese investment in alternative corridors, ports, pipelines and overland infrastructure may thus be a sign of diversification of access and minimisation of vulnerability (Ji, 2007).

China has also used funds to advance into the military's modernization and new technologies. Struggle for critical minerals, artificial intelligence, cyber systems, space systems, hypersonic weaponry, and advanced manufacturing now plays a prominent role in the broader contest. Another paper indicates that technological leadership might be the key to how the future balance of power will be decided, alongside traditional military capabilities (Gulley et al., 2018; "China's Search for Military Power," n.d.).

Diplomatic efforts by China emphasizes principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, dialogue, not interfering with others' internal affairs, and indivisible security. Its Global Security Initiative plays an alternative role than the alliance system that the United States is advocating. These ideas, however, are challenging from a critical perspective due to their being used as a means to legitimise China's own regional agenda as well as to thwart foreign pressure.

India's Strategic Role and the Pursuit of Autonomy

A central place in the Indo pacific literature is taken by India on account of its geographical, economic, military and historic rivalries with its adversary China. The United States is finally taking India as an indispensable partner to provide essential support in maritime security, regional connectivity and the broader power balance. The inclusion of India in the Quad group, defense cooperation with the United States and the increasing militarization of India have strengthened these perceptions (Scott, 2012; Wojczewski, 2016).

However, strategic autonomy is in focus in the literature on India. India has improved ties with the US and is yet to form a formal partnership or bring American agenda to its foreign policy. Its strategy is to

cooperate with Washington, to continue its engagement of Russia, have a lot of trade with China, and then to have its own regional aspirations. For India, strategic partnership is a means to reap its rewards without having to come aboard tightfisted (Malik, 2016).

A series of 'foundational defence ties' have enhanced cooperation between the Indian and American forces. LEMOA ensures that exchange of logistics, COMCASA ensures connection and interoperability in the communication domain and BECA exists in the domain of advanced geospatial information. The agreements enhance India's readiness and cooperation with the American armed forces. Meanwhile, they have raised concerns about U.S.–India collaboration, the military balance, regional repercussions of heightened U.S. coordination with India (Mehreen & Abid, 2022; Hameed et al., 2025; Nisar & Даниш, 2023).

The China–India border dispute is another factor that influences India's strategic direction. Indian concerns about China have risen owing to the legacy of the Sino-Indo war of 1962 and those of the subsequent wars, like the Galwan Valley incident. These tensions have only revitalised India's interest in regional cooperation and military modernization, and connectivity programs like BIMSTEC. Yet, there is economic dependency between the two nations so besides strategic rivalry, there is the need for incentives to manage competition between the two countries (Rubin, 1960; Kumar, 2020).

Middle Eastern Linkages and Wider Strategic Realignment

Competition in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly getting into the Middle East. China has emerged as an important trading partner and foreign investor for a number of regional states and the United States is actively engaged in regional security relations, energy politics and military ties. This communication between the two regions is evident in the Abraham Accords, the I2U2 grouping of the countries and US normalization with Israel. The interconnection between these two regions is so apparent from the Abraham Accords, from I2U2, and from the normalisation between the United States and Israel, one with the Gulf States and India.

But the relationship between China, Iran and Russia is also significant. These states have concerns over American pressure, sanctions and military presence – but are not co-operating in an official alliance. Iran's geographical position, energy reserves, regional power and involvement in the Chinese connectivity projects make it more vital. The country's role in Chinese connectivity projects, energy resources, geographical position and regional power make it more strategic. But the success and fate of the JCPOA and of Iran's nuclear programme also affects the future in the Middle East (Kamel, 2018).

While the literature generally indicates that the Middle East's strategic realignment will have a spillover impact on Indo-Pacific competition, it is not immediately obvious in which respects. The literature suggests that strategic realignment in the Middle Eastern region may have a spillover effect on Indo-Pacific competition, but in what ways is somewhat unclear. However, if the American military in the Middle East is cut down its burden on the Indo-Pacific is likely to grow and expand Chinese influence will put a strain on Washington's regional stance.

Nuclear Iran and Great-Power Competition

Bukhari's *Nuclear Iran: Deterrence, Power Shifts, and the Future of the Middle East* gives a concise analysis of the manner in which the nuclear danger of Iran can alter Middle East power dynamics, alliance behaviour, and deterrence. The Middle Eastern implication for the Indo-Pacific is that energy security in the Middle East region carries direct implications for great power competition in the wider region, while China's growing partnerships, as well as Russian strategic coordination, have relevance for the Indo-Pacific region. Middle East energy security, China's expanding partnerships, and ongoing U.S. military involvement are directly relevant to the Indo-Pacific, as is Russian strategic coordination. It hypothesizes that Iran's nuclear development might set a new path for regional security strategies, trigger "hedging" and impact

Washington's Indo-Pacific priorities. It speculates that the situation with Iran's nuclear program may conceivably change the definition of security in the region, provoke 'hedging' and complicate the process of Washington's Indo-Pacific focus. The study thus aims at connecting nuclear proliferation, strategic autonomy, energy routes and multipolar rivalry in interrelated geopolitical theatres (Bukhari, 2026).

Pakistan, CPEC, and Strategic Hedging

Although strategically located and lately central to the CPEC, Pakistan has not been adequately discussed in the wider sphere of the discussions of the Indo Pacific in most of the mainstream literature. The lifestyles of people in Pakistan are affected both by sea and at land where Pakistan connects South Asia, Central Asia, Arabian Sea and Middle Worlds. Through CPEC, its relationship with China has grown even stronger, as it is expected that this will help facilitate regional trade, industrialisation, energy development, and infrastructure (Ali, 2015).

Pakistan's history is equally long with regards to cooperation with USA. In the current phase, it faces strategic challenges as the relationship between China and Pakistan is getting enhanced while U.S.-India strategic convergence is building momentum. This imposes a challenge on Islamabad to refrain from relying solely on one partner, and not risk jeopardizing its security and economic vital interests.

It can be useful to refer to hedging in explaining Pakistan's approach. Hedging lies between balancing/bandswagoning. This is about selective cooperation, a limited degree of resistance, diversification and avoiding the 'irreversible alignment'. The strategic relations with China must be preserved and the functional relations with the United States, Europe, the Gulf States and international financial institutions must be maintained as well. (Markkanen & Schröder, 2010)

But Pakistan's hedging policy has its limitations at the domestic level. Political and economic instabilities, slow work of the CPEC projects, security issues, and lesser development of the SEZ limit CPEC's capability of turning geographical significance into lasting power for the nation. Scholars thus argue that military independence is not solely a function of skillful diplomacy, but is also dependent on the country's economic strength, institutional capabilities and policy stability.

Synthesis of the Literature

There are many general conclusions that might be drawn from the literature reviewed. The Indo-Pacific rivalry is structural power transition, geopolitical competition and mutual insecurity. Second, the region is not defined by an alliance struggle between two armies, an economic or economic-technology dimension, or a coalition building. Thirdly, regional states have agency and often have a preference for strategic autonomy and/or hedging rather than for complete alignment. Fourth, the competition is not only in Indo-Pacific, it's also in the Middle East, in supply chains, in technologies, networks of technology and in infrastructure.

The implications of systemic rivalry for the economic and security costs in Pakistan is still not understood. Most literature talks about the U.S., China, India, Japan and Australia as examples and Pakistan is mostly talked about in context of CPEC or region security. To fill that vacuum, this study focuses on the Pakistani hedging quandary in the context of Indo-Pacific rivalry while assessing the impact of external pressures on Pakistan's internal economic constraints and institutional shortcomings.

Research Methodology

Through this study, the researcher is utilizing the interpretive research design with the documentary analysis approach which is qualitative or interpretive type of research. This research focuses on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, and studies and strategic analyses that have been previously cited in the manuscript. The sources were chosen since they were relevant for the competition between the United States and China; geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region; forming alliances; maritime security issues; the Belt and Road Initiative by China; India's strategic path; and Pakistan's foreign policy

decisions. Thematic analysis was used as the approach of the analysis. The literature was reviewed, compared and grouped into certain recurring themes such as power transition, realist competition, maritime chokepoints, alliance networks, economic connectivity, technological rivalry, regional alignment and strategic hedging. Special focus was paid to points of convergence and disagreement in the literature. As per the study findings there is no application of statistical test rather, there is an integrated interpretation of the interactive relationship between systemic rivalry and regional order and with regard to strategic position of Pakistan.

Results and Findings

The Indo Pacific is a multi-dimensional and systemic environment of rivalry among great power. It is based on military conflict and alliances, infrastructure and technology, finances, access to the sea, diplomatic frame and regional strategic decisions. The Indo-Pacific is now the main battleground where power is being contested among various global players. It is the home of large-scale sea lanes, industrial economies, technology hubs, military deployments and nuclear power states... The region is central to the credibility of the U.S. alliance and commercial access as well as to the U.S. maritime strength; for China it is the key to development, energy security, national defence and strategic autonomy.

This intersection creates a structural contest over which will be harder to withstand if they retreat. With the shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, the integration of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the increasing significance for the Indian Ocean, maritime Southeast Asia, and India of the Indian Ocean in U.S. planning (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020; Medcalf, 2018; Haruko, 2020). The competition is based on structural change in power, now not just on short-term disagreements over policy. China's emergence has changed the balance of economic, technological, diplomatic and military power. Power-transition theory is the principle that argues that the resisting to change assertion of the established power is due to this power's level, whereas the power that asserts its rise in position wants to extend its influence and free from the established power. This does not mean that war is inevitable, but the possibility of alliance rivalry, miscalculation, and crisis escalation are increased (Kim & Gates, 2015; Shiffrinson, 2018).

The Thucydides Trap is best used as an indicator, rather than a forecast. Although historical analogy does not predict outcomes, it demonstrates the effects of fear-based insecurities, misperception, and competing commitments on changing rivalry to confrontation (Hanania, 2021; Lee, 2019; Pei, 2014). The competition is conducted at the military, economic, technological, infrastructural and institutional level. Alliances, technology and partner co-ordination is what the United States is heavily dependent on while China's approach is based on manufacturing, trade, infrastructure development and the Belt and Road.

Strategic impact is generated without direct action, for example by the use of sanctions, export control, restructuring of the supply chain, financing of infrastructure, technology standards, and diplomacy. Artificial Intelligence, semiconductors, cyber, space systems, hypersonic technology and critical resources are relevant because they are military capability attributes and environmental factors that influence economic competitiveness (Gulley et al., 2018; "China's Search For Military Power," n.d.). The maritime chokepots are a big weakness which is especially a concern for China. The reliance on the Strait of Malacca has raised concerns of disruption and/or blocking it, leading to a push for investment in other routes such as pipelines, ports and land-based alternatives (Ji, 2007).

The United States is shifting from being in alliance with another country to a networked approach. The Quad convenes the USA, Australia, India and Japan without obligations of alliances to coordinate on various maritime security issues, technology, supply chains, infrastructure, climate, and health (Bradford & Emmers, 2024; Mohan & Govella, 2022). AUKUS creates new, deeper defence integration avenues for submarine capability, technology, information sharing, and interoperability (Calugaru, 2023). Along with this, there is an economic element to the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and a geo-strategic element to I2U2 (Taqfir) that connects Indo-Pacific and Middle Eastern interests with (Singh) (Devi). These pacts are

not a unified anti-China bloc. India maintains its political neutrality and relations with China, Russia and others in a world of official "national integration with Washington. Despite better relations with Washington, India is prostrate for strategic autonomy and pursues Chinese, Russian and other ties in a climate of official "national integration with Washington" (Malik, 2016; Scott, 2012). The ASEAN countries also want economic involvement from China and don't mind US security assistance.

China's economic statecraft, diplomatic vantastories, military modernization and technological development. The Belt and Road Initiative continues to grow infrastructure, trade, investment and political ties and military modernization is meant to reinforce such powers as maritime, missile, cyber, space and emerging technologies. There is a synergy between economic and military power (Paul, 2016; Gulley et al., 2018).

India continues to be central but independent. Although LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA boost logistics, secure communications, intelligence sharing, and a greater availability of geospatial data, India does not have to resort to formal dependence on the alliances (Mehreen & Abid, 2022; Hameed et al., 2025; Nisar & Даниш, 2023).

The competition is being ridden into the Middle East as well. I2U2 brings together the interests of the USA, India, Israel, and the UAE in the fields of investment, energy, technology, and connectivity (Devi & Singh, 2025). The complication of China-Iran-Russia cooperation stems from Iran's location, energy resources and its connectivity as both theatres in the region (Kamel, 2018). Externally, Pakistan has taken China onto its confidence list, particularly under CPEC, which is the basis for any understanding of security and economic considerations. However, Pakistan also needs good relations with the United States, Europe, the Gulf states and international financial institutions. It would be expensive to be fully aligned on either side. The best option is calibrated hedging. Pakistan needs to move forward in stronger collaboration with China with mutual interest areas and have engagement with other partners too. Selective alignment, diversification and protection of strategic autonomy is known as hedging (Markkanen & Schröder, 2010).

CPEC is important but not yet realising its economic potential. It provides the support, energy resources, industrial prospects, transportation link and Arabian sea connectivity (Ali, 2015). Pakistan has to reap a diversity of benefits from CPEC, which include industrialisation, promotion of exports, transfer of projects, logistics, and diversified investments. The overall picture of the Indo Pacific area is that of competition, connectivity and fragmentation of institutions. Regional actors have agency via alignment, autonomy and hedging. Pakistan needs balance, resilience of its own and transform geography into sustainable influence.

Discussion

These findings indicate that great power competition in the Indo Pacific is a multi-faceted, systemic competition and a bilateral battle is not a viable arrangement. In addition to challenging military superiority, US and China compete with each other for the institutional, economic, technological, maritime and diplomatic underpinnings of regional order. It is a region with high-level economies, sea lines, energy lines, technological hubs, military deployment and states with nuclear weapons. These networks will provide prosperity and yet they also create vulnerability: dependence on critical routes and technologies creates opportunities for coercion.

Competition is based on structural power transition. In the fields of manufacturing, trade, technology, shipping, and institutional influence, as well as others, the gap between the United States and China has been closing significantly. Beijing wants more recognition of its interests while Washington wants to maintain the order it depends on for ease of military access, that helps align with its diplomatic alliances, and works for its economic goals and influences in rule-setting, and that leaves it less open to a regional order that it sometimes sees as conceived through, or preferring, the prism of Washington. It isn't, therefore, the result of any specific dispute, or administration, (Kim & Gates, 2015; Shiffrinson, 2018), but rather a reflection of shifting relative capacities.

The main threat occurs in a strategic trap. Alliances can provide constraints to both powers, as can the

domestic narratives and demands for credibility. Beijing has to not look weak on the sovereignty and Washington has to reassure partners. The more they are dissuaded, the less they may be willing to compromise. The Thucydides Trap should therefore be understood as a warning and not a forecast of war – both sides could well want to prevent direct conflict even if it emerges naturally for each caused by the four prerequisites of the trap. The Thucydides Trap shouldn't be thought of as a prediction of war; both sides may try to avoid a war when it seems natural that they just need the four prerequisites of the trap (Hanania, 2021; Lee, 2019).

The relationship is not yet remotely similar to that of the Old Cold War. China is less estranged from the United States than was the Soviet Union, because the former relies on global commerce, finance, manufacturing, supply chains, education and international institutions to link the two countries; in contrast, there is no universal Chinese ideology equivalent to Soviet communism. Instead, it is more accurate, to be sure, to talk of the “competitive interdependence.” While both powers aim to further decrease vulnerabilities in critical technologies and critical supply chains, they are not spreading around the idea of giving up on the exchange. However, export controls, semiconductor restrictions, investment screening and digital fragmentation will incrementally turn competition into bloc politics. The importance of maritime geography is always irreplaceable. China relies on the safe use of the sea lanes for energy, raw materials, and exports, and is susceptible at the chokepoints, e.g. Strait of Malacca. The investments made by Beijing in the ports, pipelines, overland corridors and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) including CPEC also can be seen as a way of diversifying access and minimizing exposure (Ji, 2007; Sutter, 2023).

The U.S. has still got the advantage in terms of naval strength, overseas locations, alliances, and freedom-of-navigation. Washington sees these activities as “containment” and Beijing views them as “support” for open access. This security dilemma exacerbates the security fears of both parties for expansion and a surrounding of enemies. Washington has reacted by a diffused balancing. The Quad has been organizing multilateral cooperation on maritime security, technology, supply chains, climate, health, and infrastructure, and does not impose any formal commitments of alliance on members, but provides them flexibility (Bradford & Emmers, 2024; Mohan & Govella, 2022). The term AUKUS refers to more comprehensive cooperation in the military field that involves nuclear-powered submarines, sharing information, the latest technology and industrial cooperation (Calugaru, 2023).

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework aims to complement these security measures through areas of trade, supply chains, infrastructure, clean energy, taxation and governance, as military relations can never match up with China's economic influence (Taqfir, 2025).

These will create a more robust defense system without establishing an anti-China alliances. Variations in threat assessments, economic reliance and willingness to deal with Beijing hinder solidarity and stop the initiative from proliferating. Regional states have a fair degree of autonomy. India has moved closer towards the U.S. in defence cooperation, is part of the Quad, and has enhanced logistics, communication, and geospatial work; but has not lost sight of strategic autonomy, economic links with Russia, or defence ties with China. India thus views alignment with Washington as part of an “Balanced Foreign Policy”, rather than a “formal subordination” (Scott, 2012; Malik, 2016).

The same is true of the ASEAN countries. Many rest on the Chinese for trade and investments and appreciate American presence for security. They prefer hedging, institutional centrality and cooperation based on issues. There is no guarantee that containment will be able to lift off Washington's shoulders, and any pressure Beijing exerts on the economy can not automatically be translated into political loyalty. The path China has taken is a mixture of economic statecraft, military modernisation, technology and diplomacy and talking points. The Belt and Road Initiative studies influence and dependence on routes and institutions other than its own by fostering trade, infrastructure, and finance, and lowering reliance on those of others (Taeuber, 2020; Sutter, 2023). Funds for naval capabilities, missiles, cyber, space systems, AI, and advanced manufacturing are directed at safeguarding China's national interests but have also served to fuel

anxieties of expansion. There is a multiplier effect between economic and military strength, with industrial strength enabling defence industry production, and defence capabilities providing protection for trade and strategic access (Gulley et al., 2018).

The race for technology may come down to the wire. Semiconductors, AI, cyber systems, space enclaves, surveillance, secure communications and critical mineral supplies are determinants of economic and military influence. China's strength lies in manufacturing, the market scale, deployment of infrastructure and rapid commercialization, while the United States has an edge in research, financial resources, alliance-driven innovation, and technology transfer. States within regions will become more likely to have to choose between two or more digital systems and standards in the long-term future.

The competition extends from the Indo Pacific region straight to the Middle East and is linked by pipelines, the routes of transport, ports, investments and defence cooperation. I2U2 is a grouping of economic and technological cooperation between India and Israel, UAE and the U.S. and indirectly to China's increased presence in the region (Devi and Singh, 2025). The China–Iran–Russia partnership complicates matters due to the fact that they are against the same sanctions and pressure from the US, but with conflicting interests. Iran is a location of great importance in an energy-rich region in terms of its relevance to its regional connectivity (Kamel, 2018).

Pakistan is in a tough hedging situation. It has seen an expansion in its ties with China in several spheres, including defence, infrastructure, energy and in the pact of CPEC and western interest is still very strong. Aligning with either side is expensive, for trade, international finance, technology, education, diplomacy, and relationship with the Gulf.

A viable solution is to use hedging. It facilitates Pakistan to continue its pragmatic ties with the United States and other countries while maintaining strategic ties with China. This is not a state of indecision, but rather a state of deliberate diversification, cooperation where it is needed and rejecting of unnecessary bloc politics (Markkanen and Schröder, 2010). Hedging may be credible only if it has backstopping domestic capacity, however. Foreign policy is restricted by economic precariousness and political fragility, weak institutions and external financing. So CPEC does not merely require an investment in infrastructure, it has to bring in the economic power through geography. Rather than building corridors, Pakistan needs to transform them into vibrant business opportunities such as industrial development, exports, logistics, technology transfer and diversification of investments. Allowing the CPEC to entice investments from the Gulf, European, Central Asian, and other investors will help defuse the notion of exclusivity and enhance resilience (Ali, 2015).

It's likely the Indo Pacific will continue its posture of multi-labourlike, multi connected and multi fragmented institutional characterization. Both have the ability to assert themselves as the unchallenged leader, but with different facilities: Washington has military power, alliances, advanced technology and geographical reach, while Beijing has commercial ties, scale, manufacturing capabilities and geographical advantage. The regional one will therefore be a combination of overlapping coalitions, selectively cooperative partnerships, conflicting infrastructure networks and issue-based cooperation. The biggest risk is that these incidents concerning the South China Sea, maritime access, Taiwan or technology could cement into rigid zones of tension. The key is to maintain communication and supporting the territorial institutions while taking into account the legitimate security concerns without dropping the deterrent. To gain a bright future in Pakistan, it is imperative that the government refrain from proxy politics, stop building resilience among its own people, diversify its partners, and make itself a connector between South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian ocean. The evolution and continuity of their policies and institutions, as well as their economic robustness, will be more important to strategic autonomy than their geographical location.

Conclusion

The Indo Pacific has transformed into the battleground for great power competition that integrates

permeable boundaries of economic, technological, maritime and military competition. Tensions between the U.S. and China are fundamental and structural, with Washington wanting to maintain influence with alliances, military presence, and technological means and Beijing building connectivity, modernizing its military, and unfreezing dependence on sea lanes. However, war is not inevitable, as neither power is isolated from the other through trade, finance, supply lines or international institutions. The regional landscape will not be as polarized into blocs as it may be into blockades. Pakistan has a formidable task on hand thanks to its friendly relations with China, its involvement in CPEC, affiliation with USA and an intense rivalry with India. Smart hedging is its viable choice, which relies on economic strength, institutional security, diversification of trade and moderate diplomatic behavior. Pakistan must throw away the concept of proxy politics and become a bridge between South of Asia, Central of Asia, Middle of Asia and Indian Ocean.

Recommendations

- **Establish Robust U.S.–China Crisis-Management Mechanisms.** Establish trusted military and diplomatic channels to prevent miscalculation and unnecessary escalation, between the US and China. In matters concerning Taiwan, the South China Sea and major military exercises or naval or aerial interactions, crisis hotlines, maritime communication protocols are especially significant, as are regular strategic dialogues. In addition, both are advised to be cautious in military signalling activities in the vicinity of sensitive areas. Ideal deterrence involves that both sides are not forced to rapidly or aggressively respond.
- **Preserve Economic and Technological Cooperation.** An impending total separation between the people of the two countries or the two economies would have severe repercussions for both nations, and would thus impair the global economy generally. The spirit of cooperation should thus be continued where appropriate, such as in the fields of climate change, public health, food security, maritime security and financial stability. Meanwhile, both countries should establish mutually-agreed norms in areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber operations, space security, autonomous weapons and critical technologies. Norms and CBMs could help decrease the chances of a technological accident and technological confrontation.
- **Strengthen Regional Institutions and Strategic Autonomy.** Regional states should refrain from being bound by bloc agreements, and should have flexibility in engaging in cooperative processes with multiple partners. It is necessary to strengthen politics and economical cooperation in line with conflict prevention, conflict resolution, dialogue, cooperation in the sea and lawful conflict solving in the areas of ASEAN and other regional institutions. A more proactive regional institutional system would minimise the threat of Indo-Pacific order being dominated by the U.S.-China dynamic. Regional actors are also called on to enable free and fair sea space and freedom of navigation in line with the tenets of international law.
- **Diversify Regional Economic and Security Partnerships.** In the Indo-Pacific, states need to lessen their reliance on any one superpower, and build wiser trading and investment relations, tech cooperation, defence partnerships and infrastructure cooperation. Economic diversification would help mitigate threats from sudden geopolitical realignment, political pressure, disruption of supply chains and living up to sanctions. Partnering on a selective and issues basis can offer the nation states advantages such as Chinese investment, American security cooperation and ties with the other regional and global actors without giving them away control over decision making.
- **Adopt a Clearly Defined Pakistani Hedging Strategy.** Pakistan should formally endorse a calibrated approach of a strategic 'hedge' that ensures a strategic partnership with China whilst keeping relations with U.S., Europe, Gulf countries, Central Asia and other regional stakeholders positive. Beijing isn't America's enemy and there isn't a straight trade-off between the two. There is a need to

identify partners based on a distinct national agenda on issues of security, trade and investment, energy resources, technology and education and climate resilience. This would minimize reliance and diplomatic flexibility.

- **Transform CPEC and Gwadar into Inclusive Economic Platforms.** The industrialisation of the CPEC should be backed up by completing Zones of Cooperation and operating them, improving the logistics, emphasis on manufacturing and value-added exports, technology transfer, agriculture, and industry that create jobs for the population, and as a result open more opportunities for exportation for the local industry. There should be a diversification of investment in projects regarding CPEC by inviting Gulf states, Central Asia, Europe, Turkey, etc. Inviting foreign participation of the Gulf states, Central Asia, Europe, Turkey, etc. for investment in the projects related to CPEC. It is essential to develop Gwadar as a functional commercial, logistics transshipment hub and provide good transport connectivity, electricity, water, digital infrastructure, trained manpower and it is worthwhile to involve local participation in developing Gwadar.
- **Strengthen Pakistan's Domestic Economic and Institutional Resilience.** Strategic autonomy lies with the strength of the domestic forces that a Muslim State must possess. In the way forward, the country should aim to lower external financing by reforming the taxation system, promote export expansion and industrialisation, pursue fiscal discipline and enhance governance, which will eventually demand less foreign finance. Foreign policy and defense planning, Trade, Investment & Technology along with institutions for CPEC, should be able to work cohesively. Education, Technical training, Artificial intelligence, Cyber security, Digital infrastructure and advanced manufacturing should also be encouraged in Pakistan. Improved national security, political stability, institutional trustworthiness and human-capital building would allow Pakistan to better defend its national interests than being seen as a proxy in great-power struggle and to be regarded as a regional connector instead of a divider.

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