

Sino-US Escalating Competition in Indo-Pacific Ocean: Challenges and Choices for Pakistan

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific Ocean has gained significant international focus in the 21st century. It plays a crucial role as a habitat for many countries and enables more than 80% of global trade through its sea routes. The region's abundant energy resources make it extremely important, leading great powers to compete for dominance. The rise of China in the region, together with the declining power of the United States, has forced the United States to assertively cultivate new alliances with regional states and strengthen existing partnerships. Simultaneously, China is making significant investments in neighbouring states to create and strengthen diplomatic relations. The ongoing power struggle between the US and China is having a negative impact on the neighbouring states in the region. The United States and India's strategic cooperation has prompted the area to indulge in an arms race, due to the longstanding hostilities with Pakistan. Due to Pakistan's crucial involvement in China's vital initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the country is unable to disengage from the complexities of intense competition among major powers.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific Ocean, Pakistan, United States of America, Challenges, SLOCs

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1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific comprises the Indian and Pacific Oceans that are connected through the Malacca Strait.¹ Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas, this enormous body of water encompasses the oceans of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northern Australia. The geopolitical and strategic significance of this region is noteworthy due to crucial maritime lanes, and diverse ecosystems. The phrase “Indo-Pacific” is frequently employed to emphasize the interconnectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the geopolitical and economic dynamics that are at play within this maritime area. The concept in question has garnered significant attention in global discourse, notably within the realm of geopolitical and security deliberations. The region thrives through global trade. Its littoral states are endowed with energy resources. About 80% of world trade is carried out over the water ways, of which 60% is conducted through the sea lanes of communications housed by the Indo-Pacific. This region constitutes 65% of the world population.² The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, recently formed by the USA and twelve regional states constitute 63% of world GDP.³ The region's abundance of human capital, trade opportunities, and energy resources make it an appealing center of interest for global powers. The rise of China as a competitor, however, has become a challenge to US supremacy. The South China Sea states also have internal territorial disputes that exacerbate China-USA competition. Overall, the region has evolved as a center stage of world politics.

China's rise over the past decades, through soft power, appears to be reshaping the global political landscape and China is being viewed as a challenger to the existing world order dominated by the USA as sole super power. As a result, both the US and China are increasingly

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Strait of Malacca,” last modified November 18, 2023,

² Amit Dev, “China's Rise and the Implications for the Indo-Pacific,” *Observer Research Foundation*, 2022,

³ “Fact Sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity,” *White House*, 2022,

involved in engaging regional states in economic and security pacts leaving less chance for smaller states of the region like Pakistan to stay non-aligned. This paper aims to analyse American and Chinese escalating competition in the Indo-Pacific Region and study the impact on Pakistan.

2. Methods, Literature and Theoretical Application

States in the region and beyond including US, Russia, China, India, France, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom and the states of the European Union are developing their marine potential in the Indo-Pacific.⁴ On one hand, the US wants freedom of navigation, uninterrupted access to oil along with the containment of China. By contrast, China wants to stop the domination of any global or regional power in the region for the smooth flow of energy supply for its potential industry. Similarly, India, the rising regional power wants to secure its interests through the protection of sea lanes and Pakistan is pursuing its own maritime interests through the Gwadar port. In the Indo Pacific region, Built with Chinese support, it has the potential to become an energy hub, being the deepest and one of the most strategically vital ports in the world. Resultantly, regional and global powers are strongly determined to safeguard their interests in the Indo-Pacific area.

Against this backdrop, the Indo-Pacific region will continue to draw the attention of major global powers who are vying for access to crucial trade routes and plentiful energy resources, given the region's growing significance in marine trade and heightened strategic interests. The current situation poses multiple challenges for secure navigation, which has significant impact on the socio-economic progress of the area. As a result, the changing patterns are likely to increase maritime operations in the Indo-Pacific Region, including international trade, the establishment of economic partnerships to achieve strategic goals, and the expansion and consolidation of ports. The region will become

⁴ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Indian Ambitions in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Rim: The Response of Global and Regional Powers," *The Free Library*, December 31 2012,

more complex and contested than ever before as a result of this transformation.⁵

T. V. Paul denotes balancing as a tool to contain a rising power failing which the balance of power is not likely to be achieved.⁶ The balance of power theory, which is based on realist viewpoints, suggests that states strive to uphold stability in the international system by averting the rise of a sole dominant power hence, it can be used to assess how the governments strategically are aligning themselves to counteract the influence of both China and the US in the Indo-Pacific region, where both countries are fighting for influence. The complex interplay of alliances, military capacities, and diplomatic strategies in the Indo-Pacific region can be comprehended by applying the Balance of Power theory which explains how states strive to protect their interests and prevent the excessive dominance of a sole power in the area. To achieve the basic goals of this research activity, the paper is started with analysis of current literature on Indo-Pacific region, its essentialness and security dimensions. The study looks into present weaknesses in existing literature in the regional power politics and make it to come up with current state of affairs with clarity. It further attempts to answer the question that strategic and economic realms of U S of America and China are descriptions of their cross-offensive paradigms.

After building basis of the research dialogue, the paper attempts to comprehend the influence of U S of America and power shift in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. Efforts have been made to look into the policy shift implications by four major power contenders in the Indo-Pacific Region i.e., U S, India, China and Pakistan. It is evident that China has placed growing emphasis on a "soft power" approach, utilizing cultural, economic, and diplomatic endeavors to augment its global influence.

⁵ Nazery Khalid, "The Role of the Indian Ocean in Facilitating Global Maritime Trade," in *the Security of Sea Lanes of Communication in the Indian Ocean Region*, ed. Shahrman Lockman (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia, 2007).

⁶ T.V. Paul, John J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004).

On the other hand, the historical perspectives link the U S, especially during the Cold War period, with a primary dependence on "hard power," which includes military alliances, interventions, and economic influence to attain geopolitical goals. While concluding the issue under research, certain recommendations are presented on the future issues leaving the space for the contending powers to look their matters peacefully.

3. Sino-US Strategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region

The US conduct of international relations is increasingly becoming dominated by her efforts to contain China. The US has, therefore, increased its involvement in Asia, especially the Indo-Pacific Region over past few decades and came up with various forums and multiple alliances, commencing with the Pivot to Asia policy in the 1990s. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) launched in 2007 initiated a closer, but informal security cooperation in the region comprising US, India, Japan and Australia. It aimed at forestalling Chinese domination in the region, with announced purpose of keeping the Indo-Pacific Ocean's Sea lanes free from any political or military influence.⁷

Furthermore, a modified focus after President Donald Trump's visit to Asia in 2017 resulted in passing of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) on 31st December 2018. The ARIA allocated US\$1.5 billion for undertaking a range of US programs in East Asia and Southeast Asia to 'develop a long-term strategic vision and a comprehensive, multifaceted, and principled US policy for the Indo-Pacific region.' Since then, the US has been rejuvenating existing ties and forging new alliances with Indo-Pacific states. For instance, the consolidation of AUKUS—a trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific region in 2021—the formation of a new quadrilateral group I2U2 (named after the member states, namely India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States) in 2021, and an economic framework initiated by the US known as the Indo-Pacific

⁷ Soumyodeep Deb, and Nathan Wilson, "The Coming of Quad and the Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 3 (2021): 67-80.

Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in 2022 were added to further strengthen these alliances. They aim at the territorial containment of China, particularly intervening in Chinese Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in the Malacca Strait when needed. Through these strategies, alliances, and forums, India has been termed a US strategic partner, thus considered a US bulwark against Chinese power.

The AUKUS which is a security alliance, comprising Australia, UK and US was concluded in 2021, focuses on containment of China.⁸ Under this pact, the US will be providing nuclear submarines and back up technology to Australia. On the other hand, I2U2 is a group which comprise Israel, India, UAE and USA to collaborate in economic, technological and private sectors, enhancing cooperation in trade, infrastructure development and renewable energy. It has also been termed as a new Quad by some writers.⁹

Moreover, the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the U S published in February 2022 is based upon the pillars i.e., consolidating partnerships, deepening coalitions and strengthening alliances; enhancing trade relations with the states and creating new opportunities to engage partners; and increasing deterrence and encouraging long term peace and stability in the region.¹⁰

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is another initiative by the Biden administration to offset the negative consequences of the US walking out of the Trans Pacific Partnership. It includes Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. It aims at connectivity, trade and maintenance of supply chains, clean energy, de-carbonisation and infrastructure development,

⁸ “Aukus: UK, US and Australia Launch Pact to Counter China.” *BBC News*, September 16, 2021.

⁹ Anirban Bhaumik, “I2U2 Summit: India, Israel, US & UAE to Form New Bloc,” *Deccan Herald*, June 16, 2022.

¹⁰ “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States February 2022,” *White House*, February, 2022.

tariff concessions and anti-corruption.¹¹ The USA has provided \$150 million to start this forum.

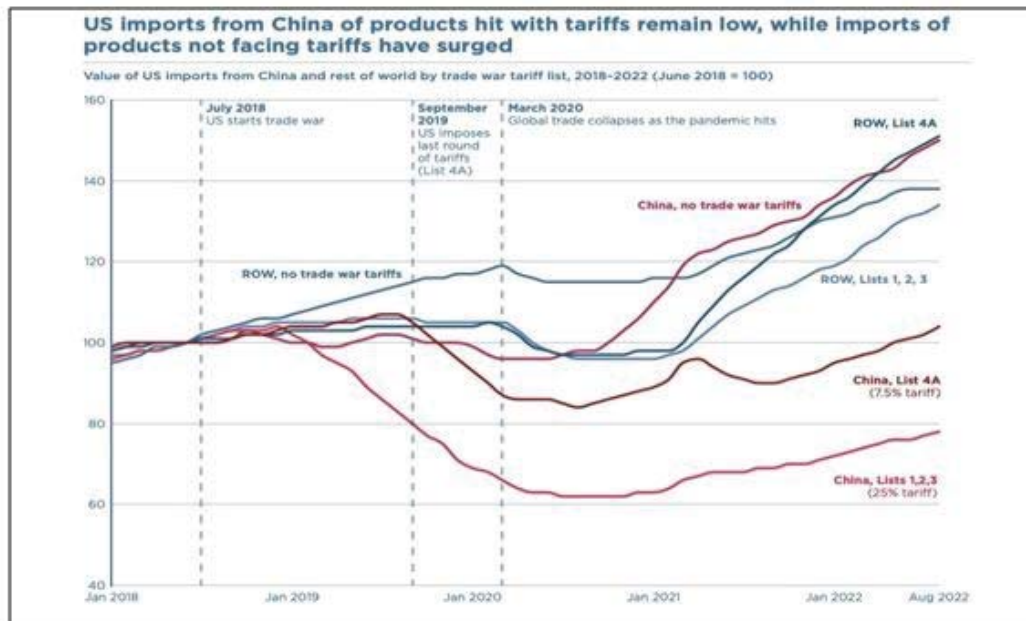
Amid the competition with China, the USA is trying to induce peripheral states to join her in this effort. The USA has even started coercing non-aligned states to move away from China, forcing binary choices upon them like potential economic and diplomatic repercussions or joining the alliances led by the United States. Presently Pakistan appears to be facing similar pressures due to its long-term strategic relationship with China. Consequent to this, demonization of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by USA, her allies and India is also vivid.^{12,13} Likewise, US is also trying to contain China in multiple technology and non-technology domains including acquisition of high-end technology through digital authoritarianism, denying access to artificial intelligence, surveillance technologies, and satellite-based navigation not only for military uses but in 6G telecommunications for civilian use. Both states imposed heavy tariffs on each other's products as tit for tat measures of trade war. This discernibly affected the trade between them, and countries like Vietnam benefitted as a consequence.¹⁴

¹¹ "Fact sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity," *White House*, May 23, 2022..

¹² "China Lashes-Out At The US For Demonizing CPEC, Meddling In Pakistan-China Ties," *EurAsian Times Desk*, January 23, 2020.

¹³ "CPEC truly transformative for Pakistan: Pakistani senator," *Global Times*, July 31, 2022.

¹⁴ Vikas Mishra, "The Great U.S.-China Tech Decoupling: Perils of Techno-Nationalism," *Observer Research Foundation*, March 4, 2023.



Source: Peterson Institute for International Economics 2022

In response to US containment efforts, China has also made attempts to enhance her influence in the region by developing politico-economic alliances with the Indo-Pacific states.¹⁵ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that commenced in 2013 helped China in expanding her sphere of economic influence. The US, and her allies have sometimes viewed this as a strategic initiative to dominate the world economy and supply chains. Furthermore, The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020 and China-Solomon Island Pact in 2022 also contributed in expanding Chinese influence around the globe in general, and in the region in particular.

Cognizant of US efforts to isolate and contain it, China started taking counter measures to reduce US influence, especially in the Western Pacific. China has been engaged with the South Pacific countries for over three decades through various regional forums such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and China Pacific Island Countries Forum started in 1990. China provides about \$1 million each year to

¹⁵ Weixing Hu, and Wang Meng. "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Response," *China Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 143-176.

the EDCF secretariat. In 2020, China added a \$1.9 million fund to support this region's response against COVID -19.¹⁶

Moreover, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), led by China, is a regional alliance with the purpose to enhance free trade in goods and services, investments, economic and technical cooperation in the region. It comprises Australia, New Zealand, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Japan, Laos, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.¹⁷

The China-Solomon Islands Pact is a bilateral security agreement that was inked between China and the Solomon Islands in April 2022. It essentially focuses on boosting the Solomon Islands' national security capacity. This Pact also encompasses cooperation in humanitarian assistance, disaster response and measures for maintaining social order. Under this pact Chinese ships can "make ship visits to, carry out logistical replacement in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands," In addition, Chinese forces can be deployed to "protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects."¹⁸

There is a possibility that a Cold War between China and USA may take place. Some believe that it has already commenced in the shape of trade, diplomacy, political, economic and technological conflicts. If it translates into bloc formation it may lead to proxy wars amongst the major powers using smaller partner states as battle grounds. In such a scenario the smaller states will come under tremendous pressure. The US- China competition induces pressure on the smaller states and forces them to choose sides.

¹⁶ Hu and Meng, "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy."

¹⁷ Peter A. Petri, and Michael Plummer. "RCEP: A New Trade Agreement That Will Shape Global Economics and Politics," *Brookings*, November 16, 2020.

¹⁸ Richard McGregor, "Solomon Islands Pact Cements China's Pacific Power Status," *Nikkei Asia*, April 19, 2022.

4. The Pakistan-China-India Dynamics: The Challenges and Choices for Pakistan

Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific is likely to have an adverse impact on South Asia. Pakistan holds a key position in South Asia and this cannot be separated from the politics of the Indo-Pacific region. Pakistan occupies a unique place in the current regional power struggle due to its alliance with China, support for Russia, and historical rivalry with India, which is backed by the United States. This strategic approach has the potential to have global ramifications.

America's tilt towards India is adding to the security dilemma for Pakistan. The nuclearized Indo-Pacific possesses the potential to accelerate the arms race in the region as a result of AUKUS. Besides, her extended role in ASEAN, and relationship with Asian and African states, India's strategic alliance with the USA has amplified her assertiveness in bilateral as well as regional relations, especially with Pakistan. Despite the fact that India has provided assistance to militant organizations in Pakistan and has been accused of participating in events that resulted in Chinese casualties within Pakistani territory, the West turns a blind eye to Indian actions. Indian military acquisitions of billions of dollars from USA, Europe and Israel are fast upsetting the balance of power in the region, thereby provoking an arms race.¹⁹ Pakistan's reduced conventional military capability as compared to India could result into a much-lowered nuclear threshold in the use of nuclear weapon in case of conflict, putting South Asia at the risk of nuclear exchanges in case of a Pakistan-India war. US tilt towards India and her potential support is also affecting the conflict resolution in South Asia, especially with reference to Pakistan's stance on Kashmir.²⁰ USA appears to be comfortable with India positioning itself as a regional actor asserting dominance concurrently as a counterforce against China. So, the rise of India can have significant

¹⁹ Abdul Qadir Khan, "US-India Strategic Bargaining and Power Balancing in South Asia," *JPRSS* 1, no. 2, (2014).

²⁰ Sadaf Farooq, Sadia Kazmi, and Javaria Javed, "Indo-US Strategic Partnership: Implications for Pakistan," *Policy Perspectives* 15, no. 1(2018): 3-20.

impact on the precarious stalemate between the two states. With the increase of Indian power, its capability to strategically and economically encircle Pakistan will also increase.

Given the current unstable power dynamics in South Asia, worsened by the increasing competition between major powers in the Asia-Pacific region, Pakistan could use a diverse strategy to improve its relations with India and other regional countries. In order to resolve long-standing conflicts and promote mutual trust, traditional diplomatic strategies such as persistent communication and conflict resolution techniques are essential. Initiatives for economic cooperation, such as expanded trade and cooperative infrastructure projects, can also support stability in the region. Non-traditional approaches, such as cultural exchanges and sports diplomacy, as well as technical and environmental collaboration, provide opportunities to forge positive narratives and shared interests between nations. On other hand, Pakistan is progressively involved in increasing relationships with states of Central Asia to utilize its geostrategic location as an access point to the Indian Ocean. This has principally been made into a reality with new China's constructed port facility at Gwadar. Sino-Pak strategic ties have emerged to be significant for its security, stability and prosperity over the last decade.

Pakistan occupies a place of geo-economic and strategic significance in the region: the Indian Ocean and its relative proximity to the Straits of Hormuz. Its vicinity to Central Asian States, China and Russia, ability to act as a land bridge for Afghanistan and East Europe make it an important connectivity hub for enhanced trade and connectivity, as well as providing these states transit facilities for their seaborne trade. But, despite having 1001 km coastline with the Indian Ocean, Pakistan receives less significance in US 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' and US sponsored regional alliances. However, Pakistan experiences much more pressure from the US due to evolving geo-strategic environment wherein Indian relevance to security interests dominate.

Being an ally of China and partner in BRI, Pakistan has become the victim of proxy wars. CPEC carries great potential for Pakistan's socio-economic development that will complement Pakistan's traditional as well as non-traditional security. CPEC provides Gwadar as an alternative to a disturbed Malacca Strait. Pakistan should not compromise on the CPEC. Pakistan also needs to strengthen her ties with regional and extra regional states including Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and ASEAN countries as well as join other economic forums.

Stability in Afghanistan is considered crucial to the realisation of Pakistan's reoriented national security policy. Therefore, all possible efforts must be made to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan. For that Pakistan can play a significant role as it has already acted as a facilitator in the US-Taliban peace talks. Afghanistan can be engaged politically, diplomatically as well as economically to project the softer image of Pakistan in Afghanistan. Engagements with people, cultural exchange programs, economic cooperation, humanitarian assistance, media engagements, diplomatic outreach, security cooperation and crisis management and conflict resolution are need of the hour to secure the Western border of Pakistan. Facilitating students by providing them scholarships for higher education in Pakistan may be enhanced. This will help Pakistan to construct its positive narrative in Afghanistan for long-term sustainable relations.

Avoiding bloc politics, Pakistan should not ally with any major power in new cold war. India has for years maintained the policy of non-alignment. Pakistan can also strengthen economic relations with Russia who can be a better substitute for an energy deficient state like Pakistan by providing comparatively cheaper energy supply.

Lastly, Pakistan has been partnering with the US in armed conflicts and has suffered a lot particularly in the aftermath of war against terror. Being a global hegemon, US has her due significance and Pakistan is not in a position to ignore her. While not compromising own interests, Pakistan should maintain good relations with both; the US and China.

Pakistan should balance relations with US, China, Russia, EU, Middle East, Far Asia and Africa. We should not fall a prey to become proxy of any of the major powers.

5. Conclusion

One cannot negate the significance of oceans. The Indo-Pacific Ocean region has emerged as a center stage of world politics where major powers are aggressively involved to exert their influence. The vital choke points of the Ocean are making the trade routes more vulnerable. Shipping lanes can be closed down in the case of any escalation between the two major rivals US and China their respective allies. The scenario may further worsen if the escalation deepens in the Ocean, affecting other littoral states directly and causing energy and economic crises throughout the globe.

India's ties with the US and her efforts to project her as a member of Nuclear Supplier Group can have adverse effects on Indo-Pak rivalry. India seeks to become permanent member of UN Security Council which is also unfavorable for Pakistan. Its growing dependence on China is helping Pakistan to develop economically, but it is also widening the diplomatic gap between US and Pakistan. Pakistan needs to be cautious and act sensibly to avoid any trouble in the future. It should develop working bilateral and trade relations with India. Pakistan could emulate China in this regard. Despite their strategic and economic competition, keeping the conflicts aside, China and India as well as US and China, are maintaining their trade relations. Their interdependence can help minimise the possibility of armed conflict between them. The National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022, priorities geo-economic and human security. In line with that, Pakistan can also conduct trade with India in a balanced manner. A stronger economy, with happier and healthier human capital, will complement our ability to fight the challenges of the future effectively.

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