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**Keywords:** Power transition theory, Power Competition, China, USA, Indo-Pacific

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## Power Transition Theory and the Global Power Hierarchy: Analyzing Sino-American Power Politics in Indo-Pacific Region during 2017-2025



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### Abstract

While analyzing the power dynamics, order and hierarchy in the international system, academic scholars and researchers have laid stress on the great powers and considered other states as sub-structural units of the international system. The competition between USA and China in the Indo-pacific region has led the regional in the region to configure their foreign policies to take advantage and hedge against potential risks posed by the Sino-American power competition in the region. This power transformation can be best understood with the help of power transition theory which states that hegemony of a dominant power is challenged by a great power and hence the international political system is hierarchical rather than being anarchic. This qualitative study aims to address the power competition between USA and China in the Indo-pacific region.

**Keywords:** *Power Transition Theory, Power Competition, China, USA, Indo-Pacific*

### Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region spans around the Indian Ocean and the Western and Central Pacific Ocean which are connected by the sea. The political importance of this region was emerged when the German geopolitician Karl Haushofer first time termed this region as Indo-Pacific region in 1920 (Yousafzai et al., 2024). In the recent years, China has expressed a significant progress in economic, military and technological domains and has emerged as a great power that challenges the United States in Indo-Pacific region at various positions. The region of Indo-Pacific is a vast region which is both geographically and geopolitically interconnected and spans over the tropical waters of the Pacific and Indian Ocean as well as the sea that connects the region. This region is recognized as one of the major economic hubs in the world and is the political center for great powers.

According to Nguyen et al. (2024) more than 60% of the total maritime trade is done through this region that brings powers such as United States and China into competition over the maritime trade. In the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the region has grown into a theatre for the great power rivalry hosting three of the major economies in the world India, China and Japan. The region has been serving to drive the global supply chain and energy transits and the security of the coast line is critical for the maritime trade. The territorial disputes such as the South China sea and Taiwan dispute and the transition of power nations in the region have formed multilateral alliances (Nguyen et al., 2024). Countries such as Japan, India and Australia have formed AUKUS with the United States in order to contain the influence of China in the region.

The subject of International Relations as well as, that of the political science has been prevailed by the realism school of thought which is power centric and suggests that the system of international power politics is anarchic.



However, the theory of power transition opposes this notion and suggests that the system of international power politics follows a hierarchy (Hopewell, 2025). The theory of realism focuses only the power, dimension, on the other hand, power transition theory not only focuses on the dynamic power of states but also stresses on the hierarchical structure of the international system which is composed of the different layers of conflict and cooperation by using both the military means and soft power elements such as diplomacy, technology and economic elements. The concept of challenger state as revisionist powers and status quo have emerged as a main domain in the theories of international relations.

A revisionist state, is a state which seeks to change and dominate the current international system, the order or current international organizations, rules and norms resulting distribution of goods or benefits (Hopewell, 2025). On the other hand, the status quo state strives to maintain and defend the current international order. The theory of power transition regarding the revisionist and status quo states, emphasizes on the factor that whether, the current international order collapse or endure during the transition of power. The theory of the realism in international relations suggests that, the rising power and the status quo state, both hold conflict interests and agendas and hence, the rising power is considered to be a challenger of the current international order, rather than a supporter of it.

The theory of power transition, was proposed by Organski, in 1958, that stresses the on the elements of a rising power in the international systems which is not satisfied with the present world order, norms and institutions, and hence challenges the status quo). This theory further suggests that the international order is composed of multiple powers in a hierarchical manner, rather being an anarchic system (Niebel, 2020). This system is led by a dominant power at the top and below that there are several great powers in the competition to attain the status quo. This article hence aims to analyze the power rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region using theory of power transition.

## Literature Review

Hopewell (2025) in an article titled as “*Challenging the status quo-revisionist power dichotomy: China and the United States in the trade regime*” states that revisionism has been used as ‘pejorative code word’ for the disapproval of an observer for a state or its policies. This article further elaborates the competitive assessment of China as a challenger state against the liberal intuitionism of the United States. This article also includes the trade values of both China and the United States the role of WTO for the global trade rules (Hopewell, 2025). However, in terms of the trade values this article does not include the trade and tariff war between China and the United States which is an important element for the economic competition between both that needs.

Congress (2025) in a report titled as “*AUKUS and Indo-Pacific Security*” In 2021, Biden Administration announced a trilateral security partnership known as AUKUS to deepen cooperation between Australia, UK and USA in the Indo-Pacific region. AUKUS has been established particular to counter the deepening military presence and interests of China in the region. Besides being a trilateral platform, AUKUS also seeks to involve other countries in the region where Japan, New Zealand, Canada and South Korea have sought to engage with the AUKUS. Australia has embraced the AUKUS where the government conveyed its concerns over the coercive tactics of China in the region through their 2024 National Defense Strategy. UK has also shared its concerns on the expansion of China and expressed its support and interest of AUKUS (Congress, 2025). However, this report does not offer insights into the vetting interests and expansion of China in the region in details.

Wisnugroho (2024) in an article titled as “*New Regionalism: Belt and Road Initiative and the Indo-Pacific Region*” suggests that China on the other hand, focuses on the infrastructure development and attempts to strengthen its relations with the small structural units while challenging the alliances of the USA. One of the major projects that validates Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific region is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that spans more than 100 countries. 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road project under the BRI connects Asia, South Asia, Africa, and Europe with chin through sea routes. BRI with its main objectives as policy coordination, infrastructure development, social exchange and financial integration considers Indo-Pacific region as a central point for its success (Wisnugroho, 2024). This article however, does not focus on the power competition dimensions of USA and China which needs to be explored more.

An article “*Historical Insights of Global Power Transitions: Implications on US-China Relations*” authored by Ali and Khuhro, (2023) states that the core elements of the theory of power transition and power parity such as dominant power, great powers, middle powers and small powers. United States has witnessed a decline in its soft and hard power elements such as economy, military and leadership shrinking its influence on the global level. The US could not sustain its liberal democratic norms to the present scenario and hence China has found a way to enter in the global political arena and establish itself as a challenger state (Ali & Khuhro, 2023). Although this article offers meaningful insights into the power transition theory and US, China power competition, yet, it does not focus particularly on the dimensions of technological advancement, where China has expressed a huge development.

Nye (2023) in a book titled as “*Soft power and great-power competition: Shifting sands in the balance of power between the United States and China*” argues that the importance of the soft power elements such as diplomacy, civilization, leadership, cultural exchange and economic development is playing a crucial role for China as transforming into a rising power. There are several opportunities and challenges that China is facing being a soft power and focusing on the economic development and social exchange projects. These include challenges from non-state actors as well particular in the South Asian region (Nye, 2023). This book, however, does not focus largely on the elements of power such as demography, birth and death ratio, the military advancement and technological race between the two countries.

An article by Khan et al., (2022) titled as “*Power transition and global international order*” suggests that Power transition theory was first proposed by Kenneth Organski's which stresses the exchange of power between states. This theory suggests that there are various layers of states in terms of power such as dominant power at the top, the great powers followed by middle powers and small powers. An article by Khan, Khan and Khan discusses the historical perspectives of the theory of power transition from the middle age when in 1815 Britain defeated the French arm of Napoleon to the World War I when United States emerged as the new dominant power (Khan, Khan & Khan, 2022). This article explains the power transition in this period in four modes such as power transfer from Portugal to Spain, Spain to Netherlands, Netherlands to Britain and finally Britain to United States. This article further adds meaningful insights to the power competition dynamics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century focusing the United States and the China. Yet, it lacks focusing the new phase of economic competition between two countries. While analyzing the power dynamics, order and hierarchy in the international system, academic scholars and researchers have laid stress on the great powers and considered other states as sub-structural units of the international system.

Nagy (2022). “*US-China strategic competition and converging middle power cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*” states that the competition between USA and China in the Indo-pacific region has led the regional in the region to configure their foreign policies to take advantage and hedge against potential risks posed by the Sino-American power competition in the region. Major players as middle powers in this region are India, Japan and Australia. Middle powers have been assessed by scholars in two dimensions such as positional and functional. Positional refers to the power indicators such as GDP, population size and the defense expenditures (Nagy, 2022).

In this article, “*The power transition theory and the Sino-American contention for power.*” Niebel introduced the concepts of status quo and revisionist states, explaining that a status quo state attempts to defend the current global order, while on the other hand, a revisionist states is a dissatisfied state having conflicting agendas and interests to the status quo states and hence they attempt to challenge the dominating powers (Niebel, 2020). This article addresses the power competition of China and USA focusing on different areas such as economy, military and leadership and provides examples such as the conflict of South China Sea.

Jisi (2022) in an article titled as “*China in the International order: A Contributor or a Challenger? In China's Rise and Rethinking International Relations Theory*” states that in terms of the international system, China could be understood as a political China as well as a civilizational an ethnic China. The initiatives such as Belt and Road Initiative have, Confucius Schools and Silk Road Economic Belt establish an economic image of China. This article suggests that China has entered already in the game of power with the United States and in the next decade the power structure may change (Jisi, 2022). However, the article does not provide significant insights into the economic, military and particularly ignores importance of demographic element of the power between China and the United States.

This article, “*The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know.*” By Smith, elaborate The Quad, which is known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, originated in 2004 a group of four countries: the USA, Japan, India and

Australia for maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. However, later on this group has advanced its cooperation among other sectors such as security, economy and health issues. This group has emerged as an alliance against the Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific region. All four countries have participated in joint Navy exercises in 2020 and in 2021, President Biden addressed the heads of the states of Japan, Australia, an India to further advance their cooperation (Smith, 2021). However, this article does not bring meaningful insights, presenting the counter efforts of China for the QUAD.

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## Conceptual Framework

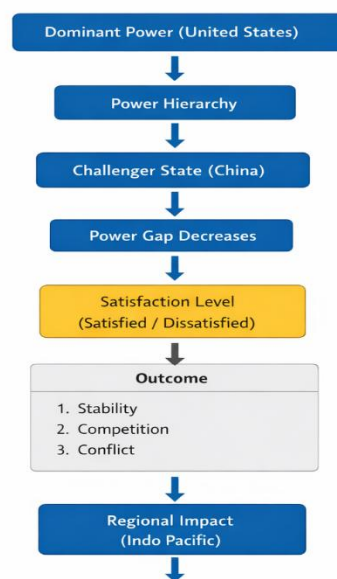
To investigate and explain power competition between a dominant power and the nearest great power to that state, power transition theory can be most suitable. This theory divides powerful and influential states into dominant power, great powers, middle powers and then other structural units. To understand the Sino-American power competition in the Indo-Pacific region making alliances and involving themselves in the development and security projects this theory could be useful. This theory brings meaningful insights defining power politics and elements of power of a state such as its influence on global arena, governance and organizational structures within the state. However, this thesis analyses military and economic growth of both countries giving each other a hard time in the Indo-Pacific region.

Power transition theory originally proposed by A.F.K Organski offers new insights to power dynamics and international political order. In contrary to the traditional theory of realism that views the power as an existential element, the theory of power transition suggests that power has layers, where a state with more power dominates the international order that is followed by the great powers, middle powers and small powers (DiCicco, 2016). This theory suggests that transition of power or gaining power from one state is risky and the challenger state attacks the powerful dominating state when the dominator is already at the weakest position.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*

Conceptual Framework Based on Power Transition Theory



Source: Researcher

## Material and Method

This article follows a qualitative design to investigate the elements of power between the United States and the China. The researcher in this article follows a secondary data collection to address the aim of the article. Sources such as various journals, previous reports, books, articles and publishers are used to collect data online as secondary sources. This article uses the thematic analysis method to analyze the qualitative data collected from secondary sources. Furthermore, themes are constructed from the textual data and analyzed to obtain meaningful information. The researcher adheres to all the ethical and legal guidelines for the collection of data. All the secondary sources are properly referred to the original source.

## Results and Discussions

### Power Transition Theory and Global Power Hierarchy

Power transition theory originally proposed by A.F.K Organski offers new insights to power dynamics and international political order. In contrary to the traditional theory of realism that views the power as an existential element, the theory of power transition suggests that power has layers, where a state with more power dominates the international order that is followed by the great powers, middle powers and small powers. This theory suggests that transition of power or gaining power from one state is risky and the challenger state attacks the powerful dominating state when the dominator is already at the weakest position.

According to Rauch and Wurm (2011) Although in the international system, both hegemony and power transition are sought as similar approaches, yet, they differ from each other. A hegemon system is one where the international order is dominated by one state, on the other hand, the power transition theory suggests that there is a challenger state which is not satisfied by its current role and potentially challenges the current status quo of the dominated state. In this situation the structural hegemony of the dominated state is challenged and is ceased to exist (Rauch & Wurm, 2011). Therefore, some of the scholars suggest that the theory of power transition comes into effect where the hegemony approach ends. However, for the international order both of these theories can be applied simultaneously and the natural intersection point for both of these theories is the peaceful transition of power.

At every moment in the history the international system of power and politics is led by the most powerful state and the global system subsequently includes other elements of big medium as well as dependencies and minor governments. This system is more stable and there is a relative peace and stability if both of the challenger state and the leading power remains in cooperation over the universal command. When the second largest power close to the current leading state feels a vital strength in its national power, it may put the current system into a trial. The rising power and the challenging states aim to change the current global system in order to serve their national interests in a better way as a result of the growing influence they have (Stares et al., 2020).

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, United States witnessed a huge growth and it was developing as a strong economic power. At the same time United Kingdom was a great power too, but due to its engagements at different positions, United Kingdom was at the last phase of its dominating power. At that time, Although US seemed to be a threat to the UK but that did not happen and US surpassed the economic power of UK without any war fought between both countries and both countries signed agreements and terms for a peaceful transition of power from UK to the US (Khan et al., 2022). Both of the countries went into alliance which later played a vital role in world wars.

The theory of power transition with respect to the hierarchy of international order puts the dominant leading nation at the top of the pyramid. The dominant nation with most of the tenure at the top is considered to be the most powerful state heading the global power politics. Below the pyramid there are great powers, those do not match the current status of the leading nation, yet, they could grow over time and compete the dominant state. And finally, there are dependencies, colonies and smaller states that are not in the race of the great power rivalry.

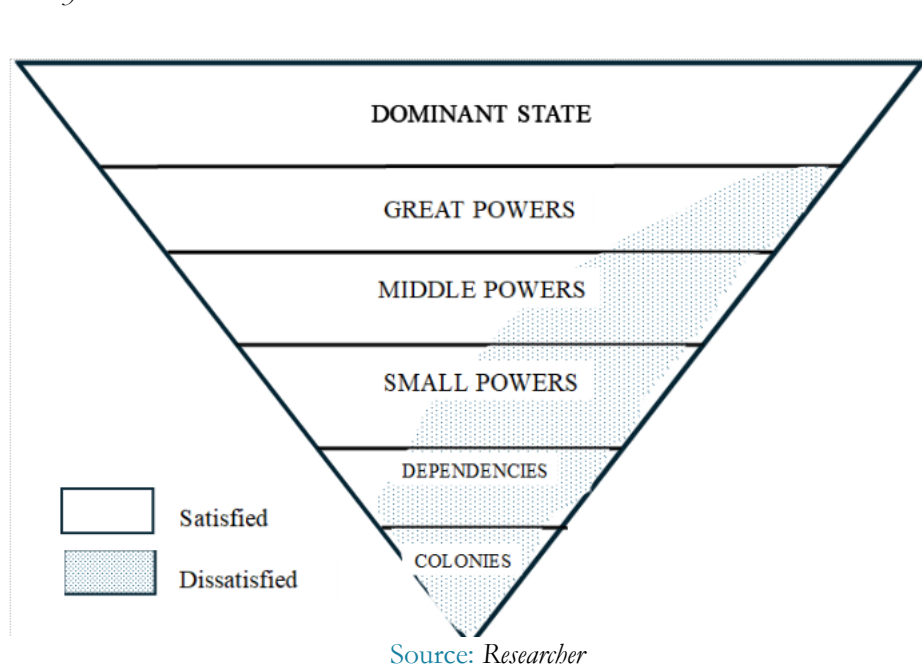
Although power transition theory resembles with the theory of realism emphasizing that power the major element that shapes the way in which global power politics functions. Yet, this theory does not focus only on the maximization of power but also stresses on the degree of satisfactions with the current position at the global political arena. Great powers those are satisfied make alliances and support the dominant state to ensure peace

in the international affairs. Therefore, the theory of power transition considers alliances and cooperation established to maintain the current global political hierarchy as key elements.

However, all the states and nations do not necessarily get satisfied with the current hierarchy in which the international system functions. Elites and even some organizations of some countries think that they are not provided with the role and contribution on the ranks of power they deserve. When such nations are weak, they are no direct threat to the global power hierarchy and to the status quo of the dominant state. The number of dissatisfied nations and dependencies is large, however, when a greater power is dissatisfied with the current order, it may challenge the status quo of the leading state and hence it leads to conflict or even direct military confrontation between the leading state and the challenger state. Hence the peace is challenged and threatened when a challenger state seeks a new position to be allocated in the international order.

**Figure 2**

*Global Power Hierarchy*



The strategy of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region has three processes following each other. As the theory of power transition suggest, the rise of China in the Indo-pacific region is viewed a substantial challenge by the United States of America. At the second stage, the US responds to Chinese rise in the region viewing it as a power transition challenge maintaining a power balance (Scott, 2022). To maintain an equilibrium, the United States not only strengthen itself but its allies in the region as well in the region. Thirdly, the term of balance of threat is in operation that suggests that China is not only a threaten to the current power status of the United States but also poses serious threats to the regional actors such as Japan, India and Australia. In this essence the theory of power transition is greatly relevant to evaluate the rising role of China in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific region emerged as a central point for the regional strategic framework of United States in 2010 under the administration of President then Barac Obama. Later on, this has gained momentum under the presidency of Donald Trump in 2017. Donald Trump administration, administrated two reasons behind the Indo-Pacific strategy discourse, one is geo-economic and other is geo-political. The geo-economic shift in the US strategy framework deals with the trade volumes particularly the flow of energy resources in Indian and Pacific Ocean and the geo-political shift is particularly strategized to deal with the increasing influence of China in the region as well as to engage with another great power Indian that has a significant influence in the region (Jung et al., 2021). Since 1945, US led the Indian Ocean as a leading power, however, now China is asserting challenges to hegemony of US and the regional actors such as Japan, India and Australia. While, China is

definitely not the only power having a significant influence on the Indo-pacific region posing challenges to the US interests, Indian is parallelly rising a huge economic power at the international arena. Facing two rising power Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared a vital distinction between both and called stronger ties with India in order to counter Chinese rise in the region.

Power Transition Theory is vital to international relations as it describes how imbalances between states create conflict in the international system. Organski formulated the theory and depicts the international system as a hierarchically ordered system. He also states that the distribution of power facilitates stability and conflict. The theory primarily concerns the interaction of the dominant power and the challenger state (Azeem Gul et al, 2023). The dominant power is the highest state in the international order and is capable of constructing rules and institutional frameworks, as well as control over the order. The dominant power provides security and economic leadership and fosters stability. The challenger state is the state that has the potential to take the dominant power position and is, thus, dissatisfied with the international order in its current state of being.

The theory states that the distribution of power among the dominant and challenger state creates a competitive order and a degree of uncertainty due to the differing perceptions that the dominant and challenger states have concerning the international order. The dominant state has vested interests in the system as it seeks to protect and maintain the status quo, while the challenger state seeks alterations to the current system. This divergence of goals creates a rivalry, and to some degree, a competitive rivalry (Zhang and James, 2023). A crucial component of Power Transition Theory is the concept of power parity. Power parity refers to a situation whereby the capabilities of the challenger state come to approximate those of the dominant state.

### **Sino-American Rivalry in Indo-Pacific Region**

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In the recent years China has both militarily and economically projected itself as a great power in the Indo-pacific region. With ocean sources and routes and more valuable resources lining the coasts, the Pacific provides China with more than enough incentives to transport resources to the region (Ali & Khuhro, 2023). The Pacific has always been of some interest to China, however, in the past decade, it has been better able to and has more aggressively sought to expand its influence over the region. To facilitate this, China has increased economic, diplomatic and political activity in the region. China has increased development aid, begun providing more loans to Pacific states and has been more active in negotiating bilateral and unilateral trade agreements.

The region with more than two great powers and developing states needs more financial aid. However, the nature of Chinese aid is a more of the strategic nature to balance its interests and to advance its authoritarian agenda in the Pacific. It is understandable why every other country would want to engage with the Indo-Pacific given its trade value and strategic significance. In addition to that the shifts in global politics and China as a

great power is willing to further establish its dominance over the region having India, Japan and Australia as key allies of the United States posing serious threats to the Chinese interests.

The establishment of the Silk Road (BRI) by President of China Xi has resulted in a rapid change of strategy in the Indo-Pacific, and has changed the dynamics of the Pacific by expanding the role of India and China. As the United States expands its ties, along with the other countries, China seeks to find a way to integrate the complex and contradictory rivalry of investment and trade. Indo-Pacific region hence is characterized by a complex assessment of the power and the productive and counterproductive diversities of cooperation, competition and rivalry between the United States and Chinas (Silin et al., 2018). Maritime and economic challenges create the imperative of a region that fosters cooperation and multilateral engagement.

The rising powers and middle powers also seek to tackle the growing influence of China in the region. The Indo-Pacific countries with their preference for stronger cooperation and increased multilateral relations champions coexistence with varying degrees of development and participation, such as peace and basic stability to greater economic interdependence (Peters, 2021). China rise as a challenger state in the region is based on its political, military and economic influence, where projects such as Belt and Road Initiative advances its political and economic agendas, while on the other hand, China's ties with Taiwan and its engagements in the South China sea develops its military agendas to compete with the United States in the region.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) formalized the US position on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy and expanded the earlier Washington policies of the Pivot to Asia (Allison, 2017). It was introduced in the late 2010s as part of the United States' response to the changing regional environment. It places an emphasis on a rules-based order, recovers the United States' interest on the freedom of navigation, the economic interlinkage and reinforced partnerships with the regional states. (Nawaz et al., 2025). Strategic documents, statements and diplomatic contacts of the United States and its allies, provoke apparent efforts to consolidate political, military and economic responses to the challenges posed by the rise of China.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) stems from U.S. re-evaluations of international relations in light of China's potential to reshape global politics. Specifically, the 2017-2025 IPS reflects a more embedded military, economic, and diplomatic U.S. presence in the region, as part of the U.S. vision for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This section examines the IPS's origin, aims, evolution, and the strategic responses from China. The Indo-Pacific Strategy evolved from a variant of the dominant Asia-Pacific framework that shaped the U.S. policy toward East and Southeast Asia. U.S. foreign policy designers believed that the Indian Ocean was not a defining area for U.S. engagement in strategic activities (Nawaz et al., 2025). The greater alignment of India, Japan, Australia, and the major Southeast Asian states was a strategic imperative for the U.S. to formally integrate these nations into the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) consists of four countries: the United States, Australia, India, and Japan. Their first formal collaboration regarding the coordination of sea patrols began following the humanitarian relief efforts after the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. Presently, the Quad includes democracies that utilize a variety of approaches to deal with security and economic and health issues. Historically, the Quad has had inconsistent success with diplomacy. It is an informal, loose structure (Chanlett, 2022). Japan focused more on the democratic values of the four countries, while India focused on the cooperative aspect. The Australian representatives have been more cautious about the group being perceived as a formal alliance.

In 2021, Australia, the UK, and the US began a trilateral security partnership designed to, "deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region." AUKUS is seen by some Members of Congress and analysts as a reaction to the rising military power of the People's Republic of China and what 1 senator referred to in a press statement as the, "urgent challenge China poses. (Zhang and James, 2023). US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has stated that the Trump Administration will continue to support AUKUS.

## Conclusion

The strategic rivalry between China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region spans both the military and economic objectives and hence revolves around conflict and cooperation. This rivalry can be best explained using theory of power transition which distributes power into various layers, where the leading nation is at the top followed by the great middle and small powers. China has expanded its presences in the region through projects such as BRI and its ties with the regional countries such as Taiwan, South Korea and Vietnam. Sino-

American rivalry is not limited to military confrontation. It includes economics, technology, politics, and competing global orders. As a result, the Indo-Pacific is a continuously changing and contested region of the world where both competition and collaboration impact the strategic context of regional states. The results of this research show that the rivalry between China and the United State generates a combination of opportunities and challenges for countries in the Indo Pacific Region. On the one hand, this competition generates significant levels of political and security-related pressures and instabilities that make policymaking for these states more difficult. On the other hand, this rivalry also generates resources, both in the form of competing investments as well as multiple forms of institutional and diplomatic resources, that can be drawn upon to improve the development and strategic capacity of these states.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this article, there are a few recommendations as well for China and USA rivalry in order to minimize impacts of their competition on the regional states.

- Indo-Pacific region is the region that hosts most of the maritime trade and have sea routes as well as land passages. Therefore, I order to benefit from these routes and to foster trades between these countries and the China and USA, it is recommended both of the country should promote cooperation, rather than competition.
- Secondly, there are several of the regional alliances working under the United States and China, these regional alliances should put interests of the region first over the interests of the rivalries. This could bring better benefits for the region.
- Both the United States and China are involved to invest in security and military objectives as well as economic and development purposes in the region. In order to develop the region more, and to establish sage maritime trade, it is recommended that focus should be given to the infrastructure and economic development more than the military and security purpose.

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