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Great-Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Shifting Alignments and Strategic Calculations

Abstract

The current geopolitical scenario between the United States and China highlights the pivotal role played by the Indo-Pacific in the 21st-century geopolitical rivalries. In addition to evolving security dynamics and economic interdependence, India, Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN member states are regional powers that are reshaping their foreign policy in order to deal with these threats. This research focuses on the key pivots of the Indo-Pacific and the effects of great-power rivalry on the region's strategies, security frameworks, and diplomacy. The research, based on qualitative methods and primary and secondary sources, identifies the increasing use of minimum alignments, technological collaboration, and mini-lateral partnerships as the regional states' best means of geopolitical hedging to maintain their strategic autonomy. The Indo-Pacific will remain a contested multi-polar region that is characterized by security and geo-economic competition.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Great-Power Competition, United States, China, Strategic Alignments, Security Architecture, Quad, AUKUS, Regional Order, Geopolitics.

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Abstract

The current geopolitical scenario between the United States and China brings to the forefront the key role played by the Indo-Pacific in the geopolitical rivalries of the 21st century. In addition to evolving security dynamics and economic interdependence, India, Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN member states are regional powers that are reshaping their foreign policy in order to deal with these threats. This research focuses on the key pivots of the Indo-Pacific and the effects of great-power rivalry on the region's strategies, security frameworks, and diplomacy. The research, based on qualitative methods and primary and secondary sources, identifies the increasing use of minimum alignments, technological collaboration, and mini-lateral partnerships as the regional states' best means of geopolitical hedging to maintain their strategic autonomy. The Indo-Pacific will remain a contested multi-polar region that is characterized by security and geo-economic competition.

Keywords:

[Indo-Pacific](#), [Great-Power Competition](#), [United States](#), [China](#), [Strategic Alignments](#), [Security Architecture](#), [Quad](#), [AUKUS](#), [Regional Order](#), [Geopolitics](#).

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Introduction

The significance of the Indo-Pacific region in the fields of economy, strategy, and international trade has compelled the international order to reconsider and reorganize itself. The Indo-Pacific region encompasses the eastern part of Africa, Southern and Southeastern Asia, and the far eastern side of the Pacific Ocean. According to the Habibie Center (2024), this region is home to half of the global population and produces the largest portions of the world's economy. Due to such immense concentration of people and economic activities, the Indo-Pacific is the most powerful region in the world, but

at the same time, most of the geopolitical power of the world is used to control the economic and security relationships of the nations within this region. The region is a source of great economic activity, which makes it the most powerful region in the world, but at the same time center of global economic activity. (Kumar, 2024)

The Indo-Pacific sea routes—especially the Strait of Malacca and Indian Ocean shipping lanes—are essential to the world's economy as commercial lifelines connecting the trade in energy and goods with the sea routes of the world's continents (FP Analytics, 2024). These commercial sea routes are also the world's most



important strategic military choke points and are thus a focal point of competition and conflict for regional and global powers. The military and political dominance of any power wanting to influence the Indo-Pacific region depends on control of these strategic points.

At the core of the contest are the two most powerful actors in the world: the U.S. and China. The U.S. is the most powerful in the world and is the first to construct an Indo-Pacific Strategy built on the tenets of a free and open Indo-Pacific that encourages freedom of navigation, respect for international orders and multilateralism cooperation, and alliance building (JIPA, 2024). This vision is realized through policy formulation and implementation changes that include defense spending through the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (Wikipedia, 2025). Washington also sponsors the Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity to create and enhance sustainable economic partnerships with a focus on economic resilience, diversification of supply chains, and sustainable development in the region (JIPA, 2024).

China is attempting to restructure the world in the exact opposite way to the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, specifically to incorporate its national interests via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Wikipedia, 2025). It is in China's interests to develop the ports, railways, and energy infrastructures that it is funding and constructing, which increases its strategic control and economic interests in the targeted nations in Asia, Africa, and beyond. Also, China is progressively modernizing its military and is especially ambitious to expand its presence and control over the highly contested South China Sea and other critical maritime chokepoints.

Several economies, particularly India, Japan, Australia, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), find themselves caught between the crosshairs of the growing geopolitical contest between America and China are engaged in. Faced with a growing dilemma of how to balance economic interdependence with China with security cooperation with the United States, these countries are under intensified scrutiny. Take India, for example, which has positioned itself as a significant strategic player by geographically situating itself in the Indian Ocean and expanding its partnerships in frameworks like the Quad. Japan, while still having constitutional and internal restrictions, has also enhanced its security and moved towards a more proactive posture by consolidating its alliance with the United States. Australia has also signaled its readiness to partner with the United States to counter China's military ambitions by strengthening its engagements in AUKUS.

The realignment of countries within the Indo-Pacific is not simply a reaction to the existing geopolitical situation but highlights imbalances in the structure that governs global power relations. With the center of the

world's economy moving toward Asia, the Indo-Pacific will be a region with great economic potential and an important geopolitical position within global trade (Kumar, 2024). In this situation, countries incur the consequences of their geopolitical, economic, and national development strategy on the future of their sovereignty. For smaller countries, the optimum solution is to avoid being dominated by one great power while trying to retain their inner autonomy, and to create a geopolitical structure that accommodates their priorities.

Geo-economic and geopolitical arrangements have led to an intense rivalry. It is no longer a rivalry limited to military outposts and diplomatic soft power. Technology, supply chains, and industrial policy have become a core of the competition. The United States and China have contests over semiconductors, clean energy, and other technologies, and each is using industrial policy to gain an advantage (Zhang, 2025). Thus, Indo-Pacific states have to consider the economic and security implications of their decisions to enter certain trade agreements and the strategic partnerships they must align with.

To conclude, the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific is complex and carries with it numerous implications. It has a huge population, great economic potential, is a significant area for international maritime trade, and is a significant area for international strategic competition. The United States and China, along with the major powers of the region, have to trade off their geopolitical interests and international trade goals. The international great competition of the Indo-Pacific is a complex rivalry, but it is also a significant reorder of the power states, their foreign policy, their strategic alliances, and economic policies to create an order of their choosing.

Statement of the Problem

The Indo-Pacific region is currently experiencing great power competition between the US and China, which has created a unique and ever-changing environment. This rivalry raises several ambiguities, particularly for the United States' allies in the region, which include countries such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. These countries are caught in a tug of war as they struggle to balance their economic relationships and growing dependence on China while trying to establish and maintain their security alliances with the United States. The relationships and emerging security alliances, however, provide little in the way of guidance for the middle power states on how to navigate the competition or which strategic methods to employ. The situation is made even more complex by the lack of cohesive, formal, and comprehensive security architecture in the region. With that said, this research aims to fill in the gaps of the literature on the security strategies of states in the region and the emerging shifts in strategic relationships.

Objectives of the Study

The goal of this research includes, but is not limited to, the following points:

1. To study the character and the major factors of the great power contestation in the Indo-Pacific.
2. To study how the states in the region respond through hedging, balancing, or alignment.
3. To evaluate the new security designs, such as the Quad, AUKUS, and the networks related to the BRI.
4. To assess the consequences of changing patterns of alignment on the stability of the region and future order.
5. To determine the new forms of interaction of cooperation and competition among great and middle powers.

Literature Review

More recently, the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly popular within international relations literature, with the region becoming seen as a 'strategically' unified realm of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The literature for 2024/2025 claims the region has pivotal converging maritime, economic, and security interests, especially considering the region's critical sea lanes, chokepoints, and growing naval deployments. As Brewster (2024) claims, the Indo-Pacific is a conceptual shift from the Asia-Pacific, which focused to the east more heavily on East Asia and the western Pacific. The Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, has a more robust strategic vision and includes the Indian Ocean with rising significance for global trade, energy flows, and great power diplomacy. This is the region's first major entry within the literature, Panda (2024) argues. The power of major states around the interests of the region within the great maritime intersection has the power to shift. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific has emerged to transition the discourse to a highly held region as a more robust, or at least significant, construct of international relations literature. It is increasingly agreed within the Indo-Pacific literature that it cannot simply be seen as a geography, but that it represents a geopolitical vision of ordering a regional order (Mohan, 2024).

U.S.-China power rivalry affects the politics of all countries within this realigned strategic geography. Most academics assert that the tensions between Washington and Beijing are due to structural competition grounded in power-transition and hegemonic-stability frameworks. According to Zhang (2025), the U.S. enduring liberal world order is threatened by China's military modernization, assertive diplomacy in the region, and increases in global economic initiatives. In contrast, the U.S. attempts to 'balance' the global power with the self-

serving 'net benevolent' alliances, freedom of navigation, and support of democratic order. Much of the recent scholarship argues that the rivalry goes beyond military and economic into the ideological and institutional, as both powers subordinately design the order of the twenty-first century (Campbell and Ratner, 2024). China's Belt and Road Initiative is the geo-economic statecraft of China and was designed to economically dominate Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific through investment and connectivity. The U.S. initiatives, like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), are to economically support those countries to counter China's dominant geopolitics and economically integrate them into the U.S. (Green & Cooper, 2024).

As great power contention escalates, Indo-Pacific middle powers have employed different tactical approaches to maneuver in the increasingly competitive environment. Research emerging from 2024-2025 suggests that rather than opting for a straightforward alignment, countries exhibit diverse, flexible, and adaptable approaches based on particular geopolitical situations and economic interdependence (Rudd 2025). For example, hedging has become a typical response of countries like Indonesia and Singapore, which try to obtain economic advantages and maintain strategic neutrality by not alienating either the U.S. or China (Laksmana, 2024).

In conjunction with changes in state strategies, there is also an increased focus in the literature on the new security and economic configurations such as the Quad and AUKUS. These partnerships are explained as the result of the broader balancing strategies of the U.S. and allies in response to the growing presence of China in the region. The Quad, which includes the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, has shifted from a loosely structured dialogue to a more cohesive approach to maritime security, technology collaboration, and supply chain security (Medcalf, 2024). AUKUS, which includes the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, has been the focus of a great deal of scholarship due to its provision of nuclear submarine technology to Australia, as well as its significant advancements in defense collaboration in cyberspace, quantum technologies, and artificial intelligence (Tow, 2024). Scholars point out that, in contrast to multilateral groupings such as ASEAN that face difficulty in achieving a collective position on security matters, these mini-lateral frameworks are more agile in dealing with specific issues of collaboration.

Although China's BRI Expansion is improving port access, infrastructure, and trade relations within the region, and continuing to advance the regional economic framework, it is also countering the dominance of the West (Rolland, 2024). Thus, the existing literature indicates that the regional order is more appropriately characterized by a confluence of competing and

overlapping structures of economic and security institutions.

While studying geopolitics and security, analysts identify the technological and geo-economic rivalry as one of the core aspects of the Indo-Pacific competition. The literature from 2024-2025 discusses mainly the competition over the newly emerging technologies, critical minerals, supply chains, and digital infrastructure. Ferguson (2024) argues that the ability to manufacture semiconductors is an essential feature of national security that has influenced states to decenter supply chains from China. The U.S. has imposed export controls, formed technology-supplying coalitions, and placed investments to prevent China from obtaining advanced chips, while China has been implementing domestic innovations designed internally to achieve technological self-sufficiency. The digital Silk Road, as part of the BRI, has expanded China's reach over telecommunications, 5G, and cybersecurity. This has led countries such as Japan and India to finance alternative digital frameworks (Rafique, 2025). The literature clarifies that the technologically motivated rivalries drive policy realignments, influence decisions, and alter the national security policies of the states involved. This, therefore, posits geo-economics, the employment of economic tools to achieve geopolitical objectives, as a primary feature of contemporary statecraft in the Indo-Pacific (Blackwill & Harris 2024).

When discussing relationships in the Indo-Pacific region, we identify three attributes that distinguish this area, which are strategic fluidity, interdependence, and complex multidimensional competition. Most students of the region argue that emerging alignments and the rivalry of technology, together with global security changes, will be the dominant forces shaping the order of the U.S.-China rivalry. All of this will mean that middle powers will adopt new strategies that will allow them a greater latitude of flexibility and self-direction, although they will still be caught up in the politics of the great powers. Also, the Indo-Pacific region will still be contested, but crucial to determining the prospective distribution of global power.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary sources such as academic journals, books, policy papers, think-tank reports, and government documents. The analysis applies strategic studies approaches, regional security, and concepts of balancing, hedging, and strategic autonomy. The study focuses on political, strategic, and geo-economic aspects from the 21st century onwards, without addressing micro-level domestic political changes.

Findings and Analysis

Intensified U.S.-China Rivalry

The U.S.–China rivalry is further complicating the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific. In an attempt to keep a favorable balance of power, the U.S. will continue to consolidate its alliances, broaden its freedom of navigation operations, and bolster its naval presence throughout the Indo-Pacific region. In the meantime, China is responding with further strengthening of its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, military modernization, and aggressive maritime posturing. Also, with China's integration of economic coercion, specifically the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with its strategic goals, it is better positioned to shape the regional order. The strategic rivalry is further intensifying and has created a more polarized environment, resulting in a policy reboot in virtually all states in the Indo-Pacific.

Rise of Mini-Lateral Security Frameworks

One of the most notable trends in the Indo-Pacific is the growing consolidation of mini-lateral security frameworks, most notably the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the AUKUS partnership. These frameworks are flexible and interest-based mechanisms of coordination among states with similar strategic objectives and with concerns about China's growing assertiveness. The Quad is focused on maritime security cooperation, supply-chain resilience, emerging tech, and humanitarian assistance. AUKUS, on the other hand, is more focused on the sharing of advanced, and particularly disruptive, defense technologies, cyber cooperation, and the provision of nuclear-powered submarines. Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate a clear shift toward smaller, capability-focused security partnerships, a trend that is likely to continue.

Middle Power Strategic Autonomy

The middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region are increasingly showing a preference for Strategic Autonomy and the avoidance of rigid alignments with either of the major power blocks. An example of this is India, which is increasing its naval capabilities and implementing security cooperation with the United States, but with no intention of entering into any alliance. Japan, for her part, is exercising a more proactive defense posture in line with her vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, while remaining bound to her constitutional restrictions with respect to the use of military force. ASEAN states still proclaim a position of neutrality, but the internal rifts, especially concerning China, are detrimental to the overall coherence of the Organization. These are but a few examples that illustrate a range of middle power responses influenced by the highly asymmetric

relationships in terms of economic dependency, security challenges, and internal political affairs.

Economic Interdependence vs. Security Anxiety

Countries within the Indo-Pacific can experience economic interdependence with China, which leaves apprehension in regards to security. China continues to be the main trade partner for all economies within the region and presents new markets, investments, and opportunities for infrastructure financing. There is, however, coercion within the diplomatic behavior that promotes the expansion of maritime claims, creates militarization of contested areas, and creates the potential for strategic anxieties. This duality creates incentive structuring for the cohesion of countries to develop hedging strategies that balance economic and diplomatic lines of engagement with the U.S. and other countries. Indo-Pacific countries are economically dependent and simultaneously do not trust one another, which defines their strategies.

Technology as a New Battleground

Growing technological rivalry is among the most critical aspects of the competition among the great powers with respect to the Indo-Pacific. There is domination among the most economically and militarily competitive the world as they are the only ones to possess the resources. The U.S. promotes supply chains that are secure and transparent among its partners, which allows the development of sophisticated tech such as alternatives to 5G and security for AI. On the other hand, China promotes its digital Silk Road, which provides telecommunications and surveillance technology for the countries of the region. Having to depend on one of these two powers, these technologically advanced regional countries are digitally sovereign.

Geographic hotspots like the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and the Indian Ocean have significant risks of miscalculation and conflict on the rise. China's increased militarization, the U.S. military presence, and regional assertiveness increase the potential for confrontation. In the South China Sea, unofficial territory claims and coercive actions increase the region's instability. Competing political identities and military posturing make the Taiwan Strait particularly dangerous. At the same time, the Indian Ocean is rapidly emerging as a notable front on which to contest naval dominance, develop ports, and control key strategic chokepoints. These regional flashpoints demonstrate the lack of effective security for the regions and the critical lack of effective crisis management.

Discussion

The Indo-Pacific region is in the process of transitioning into a multipolar, issue-specific regional order in which states develop flexible, pragmatic, and multidimensional partnerships as opposed to authoritarian alignments. The dynamics of the present day, as opposed to the Cold War, are characterized by a bilateral framework, as overlapping spheres of collaboration and contention. The competing visions of the U.S. as a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and China as the "Belt and Road Initiative" cannot override the region's order. This grants the states in the region significant agency to withstand the pressures from major world powers.

Middle powers have begun to play an essential role as fundamental shapers of the regional international order, including in relation to norms, security architecture, and economic order in the region. For instance, India, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia are all members of and engaged in mini-lateral platforms, such as the Quad, IPEF, and AUKUS, to diversify their partnerships and enhance strategic autonomy. These countries' growing participation in the region is in line with their capacity to affect regional stability and economic resilience, as a result of their roles in supply chain security, maritime governance, and technological cooperation. On the contrary, and as a result of these countries' roles, internal political and economic constraints, as well as different perception of the threat/s posed by the external powers, particularly China and the United States, hurt collective regional cooperation, especially in ASEAN where there are significant differences in the member states' strategic outlooks with regards to the rise of China and the role of the US.

The role of national security and economic policy as central to international negotiations in the Indo-Pacific region is another defining characteristic of international relations in the region. The geo-economic competition taking place is a result of the technological, trade, and investment relations that have been weaponized. For instance, the United States and China have competing initiatives, the US on secure semiconductor supply chains with highly controlled investments and trade with China, and the US on Digital Silk Road and in other developed infrastructure. The bifurcated and fragmented technological ecosystems that now exist in the world have created great challenges for countries. The difficult decisions that nations have to face include areas of digital sovereignty, data governance, and supply chain dependencies. There is, undoubtedly, a great deal of rivalry in the world, especially for economically disadvantaged countries.

The Indo-Pacific will likely continue to exhibit complex and conflicting structures of cooperation and competition. States will continue to hedge, balance, and

align flexibly based on specific interests. The active role of middle powers and the strategic contestation of great powers will determine the region's fluid configurations. The region's architecture will continue incorporating the strategic contestation of rival great powers, activation of middle powers, and flexible configurations of regional alliances. The complex and fluid configurations of the region suggest that multilateralism to mini-lateralism will emerge in the face of new strategic opportunities, albeit with complex uncertainty.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region's strategic patterns stemming from great-power conduct from the U.S.-China relations leading to rivalry and competition encapsulate the importance of this region across the defined political, economic, and security relations in this region. Potential competitors of the U.S. have to navigate the strategic complexities of this region to modernize their military and improve in military facilities while growing their regional influence. Meanwhile, the U.S. is concentrated on preserving the liberal international order characterized by military presence and strategic alliances to combat China. Indo-Pacific states, challenged by this strategic competition, face an environment growing in complexity.

To address these challenges, middle powers have developed a variety of complex strategies. The

multilaterals of the Indo-Pacific region United States, and the Quad and AUKUS mini lateral partnerships, create flexible security alliances around China and a multilayered Indo-Pacific region that has the capacity to absorb and respond to emerging mini lateral frameworks and security challenges. This ensures that middle powers have their strategic autonomy, and economic partnerships with the U.S. and the Quad member states can multiply.

The Indo-Pacific is, therefore, progressing toward a multipolar structure defined by strategic ambiguity, hybrid rivalry, and the beginnings of technological competition. The region's geopolitics becomes considerably more complicated by the rivalry over critical domains of cyberspace, digital architecture, and the supply chain of semiconductors. The competition broadens the prospect of conflict over long-standing flashpoints, such as the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Indian Ocean, and enhances the importance of crisis management. The study, therefore, ascertains that the future of the Indo-Pacific rests on active and continuous diplomacy and the potential for cooling of competition through measures that enhance trust and reinforce a security framework for the region as a whole toward the dominant and intermediate powers. The discussion of the region, governance, and the restraint in strategy must aim to avert conflict in the region as a whole and ensure that the Indo-Pacific functions as a cooperative region instead of a conflictual one.

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