



US-China Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical and Economic Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the escalating strategic rivalry between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific area, assessing its geopolitical and economic ramifications for Pakistan. The truth is that the geopolitical future of the 21st century rests with China, and Pakistan must acknowledge this reality. Historically, Pakistan's relationship with Beijing has been primarily centered on its significant economic dependence on China, exemplified by the Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Nonetheless, the nation's uncritical adherence to Beijing's agenda resulted in excessive dependence on China, a concern for others. From a geopolitical standpoint, Pakistan ought to maintain a balanced relationship with both powers, neither relinquishing its ties with the United States nor neglecting opportunities with China. It utilizes Realism and Complex Interdependence as theoretical frameworks to analyze the power dynamics and economic connections influencing regional policy. The paper evaluates how Pakistan manages great-power competition by balancing security issues and diplomatic relations through a comprehensive analysis of literature and empirical

data. The study offers policy recommendations for Pakistan to enhance its strategic stance while alleviating concerns linked to heightened US-China rivalry.

Keywords: US-China competition, Indo-Pacific, geopolitics, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, QUAD), Realism, Complex Interdependence

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific area serves as the focal point of international political rivalry between the United States and China. In recent decades, China has augmented its economic growth and enhanced its military capabilities. The dynamics between the US and China have shifted from collaboration and engagement to strategic rivalry. The strategic calculations of the two nations, intertwined in a contentious power struggle, align with the extensive economic prospects and vital maritime routes of the Indo-Pacific. Throughout several phases of US-China ties in the Indo-Pacific, we may identify significant milestones of evolution. The trade between the US and China surged to \$582.4 billion in 2024, establishing China as the US's largest trading partner in goods. However, as China's economic and military power expanded, particularly under President Xi Jinping, it began to exert its influence more assertively in the region. China's military budget, now the second largest globally at \$296 billion in 2023 according to 'Statista,' surpasses the official figures released by the Chinese government (Taxtor, 2024) and signifies the modernization of its armed forces, including an enhancement of naval presence and capabilities in the South China Sea and beyond.

Their core interests cannot be trusted until they are monopolised, and some of the US and China's core interests are sold for their secondary interests. Although China has been peacefully assuming the role of a hegemon for the past thirty years and has consciously embraced the new role of maintaining the status quo in the broadest sense of the word, the United States has factors in its equation for China's power dominance in global politics and portrays China as being incompatible with western liberal values. The political phenomena of the US-China struggle in the Indo-Pacific has been examined using the qualitative research method. The broad concepts are developed using a qualitative research design that is exploratory and descriptive in character and aims to comprehend underlying dynamics, factors, causes, and motives.

For research analysis, the theories of realism, neorealism, and complex interdependence are employed as lenses. As a contest for dominance between states, the power struggle is a fundamental aspect of the Indo-Pacific region. The realism idea is relevant to power dynamics, including regional power, national interest, and military superiority, as demonstrated in the instance of the US-China relationship. Complex interdependence makes it possible for us to comprehend complicated dependencies, as it does in today's economics, strategy, and geopolitics. In current era of globalisation, Pakistan's policy decisions are determined by theory, which maintains a delicate balance between cooperation and confrontation. Since Pakistan's economy is closely linked to both the US and China in terms of strategic, economic,

and geopolitical interests, the nation plays a significant role in regional dynamics with both countries. Pakistan has historically had strong foreign policy ties to the United States during the Cold War and the War on Terror. The paper argues that Pakistan should engage a pragmatic hand guided by diplomacy and strategic craftsmanship notwithstanding risks and weaknesses. According to the study, we established self-reliance in the economic and defence sectors, expanded our alliances, and improved regional collaboration.

Indo-Pacific as Economic Region

The "Indo-Pacific" concept's early economic conception, which started in Weimar, Germany, should be looked to for its roots. According to Hansong Li, German geographer Karl Haushofer believed that the dynamics of the sea region were significantly influenced by factors such as capital, urbanisation, growth, and population. In his Spatial Theory of Demography, Haushofer explains why industrialisation took place in Europe rather than the Indo-Pacific (Hansong, 2022). The Asian Development Bank has upheld its earlier prediction that the growth of the emerging economies of Asia and the Pacific region would be 4.7 percent in 2023, with a strong reliance on domestic consumption. A decrease in market demand for the region's exported goods, primarily manufactured goods, particularly electronics, may force the region's industries to reduce production (Gonzalez Dominguez, Medas, & Redl, 2023). According to the entire forecast, average inflation and growth rates are rising steadily.

Over the past ten years, nations including Australia, India, Japan, and the US have used the Indo-Pacific as a geographical notion and a political strategic construct in their foreign policy calculations. The history of the area has thus been supplanted by a location for business and staking political influence as part of global power relations. These developments are altering the landscape on which Western countries' traditional domination is being contested, which in turn calls into question the stability of the global order. The "United States-India Strategic Dialogue," which was a sign of growing American involvement in the developing Asian areas, gave rise to the idea of the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC) in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

While praising the economic advantages of the IPEC, US Secretary of State John Kerry clarified that it is a groundbreaking feature that would encourage advancements, final investments, and improve intra- and intra-trade in the economies of South and Southeast Asia. To put it simply, the Indo-Pacific economic corridor represented the next significant development in the region's integration and connectedness up to the present economy (Saunders & Gilchrist, 2022).

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for prosperity was introduced by US President Joe Biden. Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam are among the twelve major members of the IPEF. Together, these participating countries' GDPs account for 40% of the world's total. The IPEF is divided into four primary parts: Artificial intelligence, data localisation, privacy, and the digital economy are the main topics of the linked economy.

Green infrastructure and supply chain links that anticipate and avert decarbonisation are the main emphasis of the resilient economy. The fair economy promotes anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, anti-bribery, and tax compliance initiatives.

The US Dominations in the Indo-Pacific Region

The United States has had a major role in shaping the Indo-Pacific region's security framework since World War II. The goals are straightforward as a concept, but they are crucial: preventing strategic rivals from growing in strength and influence, as well as preventing them from outperforming the United States militarily. Because of China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, the United States has made it a key component of its foreign policy strategy in the 2010s. As technology has advanced, new areas of operation have emerged, with cyberspace being one such area. To address the problems posed by the Indo-Pacific region's changing circumstances, the US has strengthened its ties with partners and made new friends (Orinx, 2022). The seriousness of the threat posed by the People's Republic of China was widely disseminated by President Joe Biden's National Security Strategy. This strategy recognises China's offer and its growing capacity to influence the global order to its advantage. Although the United States is aware of the reasons behind the shifting global environment, it maintains its stance on the principle of handling international competition in a responsible manner (Analytica, 2022).

Pakistan's Geostrategic Location and Indo-Pacific Framework

With the sixth-largest standing army in the world and nuclear weapons under the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty, Pakistan is a medium power. It also has a sizable and steadily growing middle-class population and is classified as one of the emerging and growing major economies. Pakistan has a political past; the political sphere developed as the military and economy went through periods of political upheaval and crisis. Indeed, regional and wildlife diversions, as well as ethnic and linguistic variances, enhance the country's cultural richness. It also discusses how prevalent issues like poverty, illiteracy, corruption, and terrorism are in Pakistan (Nasir, 2024). It is a member of a number of regional and global organisations, including the Islamic Counter Terrorism Coalition, the Commonwealth, SAARC, the United Nations, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The United States has not had a treaty with Pakistan.

Since its founding, Pakistan has made an effort to maintain a balance in its relations with other countries. Economic concerns, protection against threats to its integrity and sovereignty, and diplomacy with other Islamic nations form the main pillars of Pakistan's foreign policy and geographic orientation. Respect for regional states' sovereignty, non-interference in one another's internal affairs, bilateralism, shared interests, and sovereign equality of states are the tenets of Pakistan's foreign policy. Three of the four wars between India and Pakistan were sparked by the disputed territory of Kashmir, which continues to be the source of hostility between the two nations' populations (Pathak & Mushahary, 2024). It is impossible to comprehend Pakistan's foreign policy without taking into account the

geostrategic realities surrounding its South Asian neighbour, India. As a result, Pakistan has established strong political links with Iran and Turkey, both of which are important to Pakistan's foreign policy.

Great Power Rivalry and Prospects for Regional Integration

China's involvement in changing the global landscape has become more significant in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific area as a result of its increasing influence and assertive foreign policy. However, in order to oppose China, the United States has developed an Indo-Pacific strategy, which is the rationale for the region's critical location. Consequently, complex relationships between the two nations are established, affecting the region's political, economic, and security aspects. China has assumed the position of a global force in the twenty-first century, with very lofty objectives that transcend national borders. The economy of the People's Republic of China is in its developing stage, operating as a socialist market economy and implementing five-year strategic plans and industrialisation programs (Xu, 2011). With the help of this faster rate of economic growth, Beijing has developed a grand strategy to project power and set the framework for regional integration, competing with the United States and her allies. China's expanded influence is not just in the Indo-Pacific. China's Indo-Pacific policy is characterised by its goal of protecting its economic advantages, controlling the maritime lanes that allow it to import the majority of its resources, and deploying a military force in the area.

China increased its economic ties with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and numerous Southeast Asian nations by investing more over \$1 trillion in the BRI (Bharti, 2023). However, the economic consequences of such investments include the creation of new types of economic and political dependency as well as the inclusion of China in the political decision-making process of recipient nations. China has envisioned bringing the region together through trade links, military diplomacy, and economic diplomacy. China is a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which links 15 Indo-Pacific countries and accounts for about 30% of global GDP. It has created the largest trade agreement in the world to date. Through the adoption of various investments and methods for their strategic, military, and developmental aims for regional and global hegemony, China and the United States are vying for domination of the Indo-Pacific area.

US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Power Projection in the Region

The United States, which has historically regarded itself as a regional actor in the Indo-Pacific area, still views itself as hegemon provided it keeps moving in the same direction. From Japan in 1853 to halfway through 1867 to the Philippines, Hawaii, and Micronesia in 1898, the US government expanded its high-seas capabilities and expanded America's reach throughout the Pacific basin during the nineteenth century (Stavridis, 2017). The United States Navy was a blue-water navy that could be deployed anywhere on the high seas prior to even joining the Second World War in 1941. Earlier in the Cold War, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles used

the island chain as the eastern Asian coast's tactic to encircle Communist forces in a system of three concentric circles. Through the Compact of Free Association, it maintains sovereign ownership of more than eleven US territory in the Pacific Ocean and maintains connections with the Republic of Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, and Republic of the Marshall Islands. Since 1971, the US has been leasing Diego Garcia, a British-controlled territory in the Indian Ocean that joined the BIOT in 1965, to use as a military base. In addition to serving as a starting point for B-2 Spirit bomber flights during the 1991 and 2003 wars in Iraq and the 2001 invasion on Afghanistan, it also provides strategic logistical and analytical support (Ghalsasi, 2024).

US Military Foothold in the Indo-Pacific

One of the six regional Unified Combatant Commands of the US Armed Forces, the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) covers an area of responsibility (AOR) that spans from the South Pole to the North Pole and from the western coast of the US to the western coast of India. This AOR is approximately half of the planet's total surface area. The Indo-Pacific region is a multifaceted area of great cultural, social, economic, and geopolitical importance. More than 50% of the world's population lives in the 38 countries that make up the Asia-Pacific region, which also contains more than 3000 languages, some major powers with their militaries, and five countries with formal military partnerships with the US under mutual defence treaties (Nicastro, 2023). Four component commands the United States Pacific Fleet, United States Pacific Air Force, United States Army Pacific, and United States Marine Corps Forces Pacific support the Commander, Indo-Pacific Command, the top US military official in the Indo-Pacific Command AOR. The Commander answers to the President of the United States through the Secretary of Defence. With assets mobilised and operating throughout the Pacific, these commands have their headquarters in Hawaii (USINDOPACOM, 2024).

US Engagement with India to Counter China in the Region

Building stronger ties between the United States and India is based on countering China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Over the past ten years, the US has actively sought India and backed strong bilateral ties in the sectors of military, diplomacy, and economy, mostly as a result of China's increasing assertiveness. This engagement has now come to symbolise US foreign policy in Asia as a result of the two nations' strategic and multilateral military cooperation (Hongsong & Jamali, 2021). An important turning point in US-Indian relations was reached in June 2016, when India was named a "Major Defence Partner" and granted access to some of the most sensitive US defence technologies and equipment.

India has acquired almost \$20 billion worth of military equipment from the United States, including the Apache helicopter, the C-17 Globe-master transporter aircraft, and the P-8 Poseidon MRA maritime patrol aircraft. This military cooperation has significantly improved India's capabilities in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, where China is gaining foothold.

India gained access to geospatial intelligence and high-resolution sensitive satellite data in 2020 when the "Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement" (BECA) was signed. These resources are essential for enhancing missile accuracy and surveillance capabilities (Borowitz, 2023). Economic diplomacy has also been practiced, most recently through the introduction of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in 2022.

US Defense Deal with Taiwan and Chinese Response

Bush approved the sale of 150 F-16 A/B fighters to Taiwan even though he was aware that China would strongly object to the agreement (White, Simental, & Holst, 2023). Despite demands from US congressional representatives, Taiwan has already made repeated requests to agree to this deal, but each US president has turned them down. In order to prevent China from responding to US actions in the area, the US made gestures that demonstrated total control over the situation. The jets seem to represent the balance of power that the United States has chosen to preserve in its relations with Taiwan and China. The status change would essentially mark a significant change in US policy towards both. Diplomacy, as demonstrated more recently by programs like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), which was unveiled in 2022.

Chinese people believe that the US's relationship with Taiwan is the single most significant element influencing the character and course of US-China relations. According to China's Foreign Ministry, the US actions infringed the rights and interests of Chinese businesses and individuals, damaged China's sovereignty and security interests, and threatened peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Analysts fear that Taiwan, a significant hot spot in US-China relations, could degenerate into a military confrontation between the two nations. According to China, the United States' arms shipments to Taiwan constitute meddling in its internal affairs (Alkatiry & Triantama, 2024). "US strengthening of relations with Taiwan is the biggest obstacle in the path of consolidating US-China ties," wrote Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, in 2017. He said that the Taiwan card should be reconsidered because it is more of a liability in light of the US and China's increasingly complicated interests (Gurtov, 2022).

Economic Development of China

Over the past few decades, China has experienced the most remarkable economic gains. With its GDP, the country has grown from an agrarian nation with a low middle income in the middle of the 20th century to the second largest economy in the world. Globalisation, strategic industrialisation, and market reforms have all contributed to this kind of expansion. China's transition from a low-income to an upper-middle-income nation and from an industrial exporter to a high-tech industry nation can be characterised as the emerging process (Xushuai, Hung, & Lin, 2024). Deng Xiaoping, who promoted a market economy and decentralised the majority of economic activity, started China's economic reform in the 1980s. This nation is among the fastest expanding in the world thanks to foreign direct investment, trade liberalisation, and the extension of partial liberalisation in certain areas. China's GDP grew by

9.7% on average between 1980 and 2010. China furthered its connection with the world economy after formally joining the WTO in 2001.

A significant change occurred when the export-led economy made headlines on the international stage and the nation's exports fell from \$3.36 trillion in 2021 to \$3.38 trillion in 2023, a 4.6 percent decrease from \$3.73 trillion in 2022 (Zheng, Wang, & Bao, 2024). One of the main factors propelling China's economic expansion is its manufacturing sector. The nation is known as the "world's factory" because of its capacity to knit goods including textiles, machinery, electronics, and more. By the end of 2023, China's share of the global manufacturing output was close to 31.6%. China rose to prominence as a result of its quick industrialisation, which lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty. According to World Bank data, the proportion of the Chinese people living in poverty decreased at an impressive rate from roughly 88% in 1981 to less than 1% in 2020, demonstrating the country's economic prosperity (Jiang, Hossain, Khan, Chen, & Badeeb, 2024). The middle class and millions of customers have grown in China as a result of these economic shifts, contributing to the country's internal and international economy.

China's Military Modernization and Indigenization Agenda

China has spent more on its military than it had reported, according to the US and its Asian allies. Therefore, it might be the cause of the figures' increased openness as a result of China's economic integration with the rest of the globe. However, data indicates that a hint of China's growing military threats over a number of issues can be deduced from the most recent budget amount. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's defence budget for the current year was projected to reach close to \$227 billion, which would make China's GDP larger than the US'. Compared to the 2022 budget, which saw the nation raise its military spending for the eighth consecutive year, this is a 7.14 percent increase. Defence spending has increased even further, despite China's deliberate goal of a GDP growth of about 5% for the year (Singh, 2023). But in Asia, China has proven to be the biggest consumer and has far more military might than any other nation. China's military expenditures are currently significantly more than those of India and the next thirteen Indo-Pacific nations combined.

Exclusiveness in Great Powers Relations

A different type of relationship between the major powers has been observed throughout history and has been translated as "Xi Xiang Yi" (to be independent). These ties have been crucial to the advancement of US-China betrothing in this manner under Chinese leadership. Former President Obama and Chinese President XI Jinping outlined their goals, which include cooperation, mutual interests without the win-lose mentality, respect for each other's paramount interests when needed, and no contestation or confrontation on any issue pertaining to either party's vital interests. The idea that one's strategic interests should not be threatened to the degree of animosity is being invented by China. China does not want to intervene against

the other since it is pursuing the noninterference policy and emphasising the bilateral and multilateral achievements.

Additionally, the US has been working to create a suitable environment for China to operate in. China is a threat to the majority of regional states, and they can only balance and do their best to avoid it. They thought that by coordinating their tactics with the US, they could best overcome them and safeguard their territorial interests. However, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs only provided five aspects (Mofa, 2023) on what it refers to as the political framework of the developing relations, whereas Xi listed four characteristics of China-United States relations where China must develop relations with the country: one, jointly developing the “right perception” of the relationship; two, effectively managing disagreements; three, advancing mutually beneficial cooperation; four, jointly shouldering responsibilities as major powers; five, promoting people-to-people exchanges (Rappeport, 2023).

Conclusion

The dynamics of changing alliances and regional ties have significant ramifications, making Pakistani diplomacy face a game-changer in the context of the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China. However, in order to counter China's influence in South Asia, Washington's security agreements with India positioned India as a source of net security. Pakistan is concerned about security since India is an important player in regional geopolitics. However, as India increasingly acts in a setting of military and technological dominance, particularly in the case of Kashmir, this strengthening of the US-India cooperation puts more strategic pressure on Islamabad. However, Pakistan's territory will thwart India's regional aspirations as US alignment with India grows, and Pakistan will become increasingly isolated in international decision-making forums.

China's strategic alliance with Pakistan as part of the CPEC is an example of how China will influence Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe while also rebuffing India's ascent. However, this idea of the playing field as a zero-sum game has made Pakistan a regional chip and forced it farther into the US-China conflict. However, there is a security risk associated with the CPEC's economic benefits, and India's aggressive opposition to the project could lead to regional instability and cross-border animosity. The strategic rivalry between the US and China presents both an opportunity and a challenge for Pakistan. However, China and Islamabad have a strategic cooperation with Chinese investment in the nation. Pakistan's chances as a South Asian regional actor will depend on its capacity to uphold a balanced foreign policy and diversify its economic reliance on Beijing, friends in the Middle East, and the West, particularly the US.

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