



Geopolitical dynamics of US-China rivalry in the Pacific & its implications for International Security

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Abstract ;

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific has become a defining feature of twenty first century geopolitics. China's expanding economic, military, and diplomatic influence, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative and its assertive posture in the South China Sea, has significantly altered the regional balance of power. In response, the United States has reinforced its strategic presence through strengthened alliances, military deployments, and Indo-Pacific oriented economic initiatives. This article argues that this rivalry not only shapes regional stability but also exerts profound effects on global trade, diplomatic relations, and the future of the international order.

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1. Introduction

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China has become the defining feature of twenty-first century international politics, with the Pacific region emerging as its primary theater. The specific problem under study in this article is the transformation of US–China relations from a period of pragmatic engagement into a sustained strategic competition, and how this shift reshapes regional security, economic stability, and global governance. While both powers remain deeply interconnected through trade and diplomacy, their diverging strategic interests and growing mistrust have produced a competitive dynamic that increasingly influences the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

This research adopts a historical-analytical approach to examine the evolution of the rivalry and its implications. The study traces the trajectory of bilateral relations from the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1979 to the present, focusing on key structural changes such as China's rapid economic rise, military modernization, and expanding geopolitical influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road. It also analyzes US counterstrategies, including enhanced military deterrence, strengthened alliances, and the development of minilateral security frameworks. Through this analytical framework, the article evaluates how the US–China competition affects regional stability, global trade networks, and the effectiveness of multilateral institutions in managing

conflict, ultimately arguing that the rivalry tests the adaptability of the existing international order.

2. Introduction to the US–China Rivalry in the Pacific

2.1 Historical Context of US–China Relations

The evolution of US–China relations over the past five decades reveals a relationship shaped by both strategic convergence and deep-rooted mistrust. The formal establishment of diplomatic ties in 1979 marked a significant departure from the earlier era of ideological confrontation. This normalization was not merely a diplomatic milestone but a strategic realignment driven by mutual interest in countering Soviet influence and enhancing economic exchanges (Kissinger, 2011, pp. 71–76). In retrospect, this period can be seen as a calculated partnership rooted in pragmatic concerns rather than ideological affinity.

The subsequent decades witnessed China's rapid economic transformation under "Deng Xiaoping", which propelled the country from relative isolation to the center of global manufacturing and trade. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 symbolized the international community's expectation that economic integration would encourage political liberalization and adherence to global norms.

However, this optimism gradually gave way to skepticism as China's rise began to

challenge established geopolitical hierarchies (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 91–97).

The early 2000s were characterized by a dual-track relationship, cooperation on global issues such as climate change and nuclear nonproliferation, alongside mounting tensions over trade practices, cyber security, and territorial disputes. This period highlights the complexity of a relationship that oscillated between partnership and rivalry, depending on the strategic context and domestic political priorities (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, pp. 110–115).

The shift from engagement to strategic competition became particularly pronounced under the Trump administration, which openly framed China as a systemic rival. Economic measures such as tariffs and technology restrictions reflected a broader policy of decoupling and a reassertion of US strategic primacy (Allison, 2017, pp. 35–40). This re-orientation signaled a fundamental change in the assumptions underpinning US foreign policy toward China.

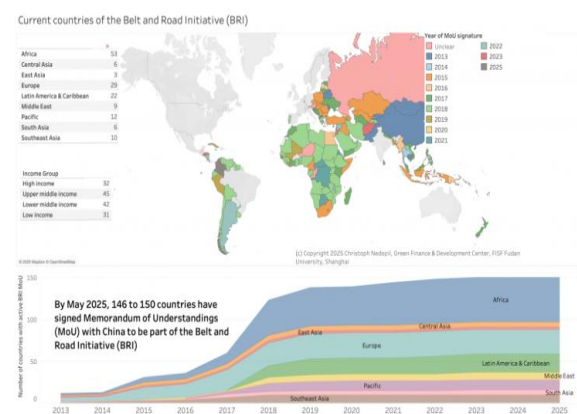
Under "Xi Jinping", China's foreign policy has become increasingly assertive, particularly in the South China Sea and regarding Taiwan. The current rivalry thus reflects not only power competition but also a clash of visions, a rising China seeking greater regional authority and a US-led order attempting to preserve its strategic dominance (Mearsheimer, 2019, pp. 21–27).

2.2 Rise of China as a Global Power

China's emergence as a global power has not only transformed its domestic structure but also reshaped the strategic landscape of the Pacific. Since the late 1970s, China's transition from an agrarian economy to a global manufacturing hub has been accompanied by deliberate state-led modernization and increasing geopolitical ambition (Shambaugh, 2020, pp. 52–60). This transformation underscores the extent to which economic power can translate into political influence.

Under "Xi Jinping", China's international posture has become more assertive, reflecting a strategic confidence that was less visible in earlier decades. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies this shift, as it extends China's influence through infrastructure investment, financial integration, and trade connectivity. The BRI's geopolitical significance lies not only in its economic scope but also in its capacity to reshape regional dependencies and alignments (Rolland, 2019, pp. 119–126).

Fig.1. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Network



Source: Nedopil, C. (2025). *Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*. Green Finance & Development Center. Retrieved from <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>

As shown in Figure 1, the Belt and Road Initiative spans countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America.

China's military modernization has paralleled its economic rise. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has increasingly focused on maritime capabilities, cyber warfare, and space technology sectors crucial to projecting power beyond China's borders. This modernization reflects a deliberate effort to challenge existing security structures in the Pacific and assert China's strategic interests (Fravel, 2020, pp. 70–74).

China's growing role in multilateral institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) also indicates its broader ambition to shape global governance. Through these platforms, China seeks to influence international norms and institutions, challenging the Western-led order and promoting a more multipolar world (Zhang, 2021, pp. 88–94).

3. Geopolitical Strategies of China

3.1 Belt and Road Initiative

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents China's most ambitious attempt to reshape global economic relations through a vast network of infrastructure, trade, and investment

linkages. The initiative aims to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through land and maritime corridors that echo the historical Silk Road, thereby facilitating the flow of goods, capital, and technology (Rolland, 2019, pp. 119–126). The BRI is not only an economic program but also a strategic instrument designed to strengthen China's geopolitical influence by building dependency and long-term partnerships with participating states.

Economically, the BRI addresses China's domestic challenge of excess industrial capacity by exporting infrastructure financing and construction services abroad. This approach supports China's industrial growth while securing access to essential resources and markets. It is therefore both a domestic economic strategy and a foreign policy tool that aligns economic incentives with geopolitical objectives (Cai, 2017, pp. 25–33).

However, the initiative has also generated significant concerns regarding debt sustainability among recipient countries. Critics argue that the BRI can lead to debt dependency, creating geopolitical leverage for China over smaller states and increasing vulnerability to economic coercion (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018, pp. 7–15). These concerns have intensified debates about transparency, governance, and the long-term benefits of Chinese-financed projects.

In addition to economic motives, the BRI reflects China's broader effort to enhance its soft power. Through development assistance and infrastructural investments, China aims to portray itself as a benevolent

global leader, contrasting with the perceived unilateralism of Western powers. This soft power strategy seeks to build political goodwill, secure strategic access, and legitimize China's expanding global role (Kurlantzick, 2013, pp. 4–10).

The Maritime Silk Road, a key component of the BRI, strategically connects major shipping routes such as the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Control over these maritime corridors strengthens China's ability to secure energy supply lines and project military power. Consequently, the BRI also has significant security implications, as it contributes to China's strategic positioning in critical maritime zones (Friedberg, 2018, pp. 66–72).

Finally, the BRI has reshaped regional dynamics by creating new economic dependencies and geopolitical alignments. Agreements with over 125 countries demonstrate the initiative's scale and its ability to influence the foreign policy orientations of participating states. Yet, the complexity and scale of these projects require international dialogue and governance mechanisms to manage risks and ensure equitable benefits (Rolland, 2019, pp. 119–126).

3.2 Assertive Policies in the South China Sea

China's actions in the South China Sea have become a central element of its broader geopolitical strategy, especially since 2013. Under "Xi Jinping", China has pursued a policy of territorial consolidation, transforming disputed reefs

and shoals into fortified military installations, including artificial islands equipped with airstrips and defensive systems. This militarization reflects a deliberate attempt to assert sovereignty and control over a strategically vital maritime region (Mearsheimer, 2019, pp. 21–27).

The South China Sea is not only a strategic passage for global trade but also a region rich in resources such as oil and natural gas. China's claim to most of this area is based on the "nine-dash line," a historical narrative that dates back to imperial eras. However, neighboring states including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei contest these claims and assert their own territorial rights (Fravel, 2020, pp. 95–101).

China's strategy in the region combines legal rhetoric with coercive actions. Economic pressure, diplomatic threats, and sanctions have been used against states that challenge Chinese claims. For example, Vietnam has faced economic retaliation after pursuing offshore energy exploration in contested waters, demonstrating how China leverages economic power to support its geopolitical objectives (Thayer, 2019, pp. 110–114).

Although China publicly asserts a commitment to peaceful resolution, its actions often contradict this stance. Incidents involving the harassment of foreign fishing fleets, aggressive naval patrols, and military exercises have contributed to a climate of intimidation and insecurity. This hybrid strategy blends coercion with legal tactics to gradually

normalize China's presence and control in the region (Buszynski, 2012, pp. 42–48).

The South China Sea dispute has drawn significant attention from external powers, particularly the United States and Australia. Washington has conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's maritime claims and demonstrate support for international law. These operations highlight the broader implications of the dispute for regional stability and international security (Allison, 2017, pp. 35–40).

4. US Counterbalancing Strategies in the Indo-Pacific

4.1 Military Deterrence and Strategic Signaling

The United States has increasingly relied on military deterrence as a central mechanism to counterbalance China's expanding strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific. This approach is anchored in forward deployment and a network of

arrangements. Frameworks such as the Quad and AUKUS reflect a shift away from universal multilateralism toward selective coalition-building among states that share threat perceptions regarding China. These arrangements enhance burden-sharing and technological cooperation while preserving strategic flexibility (World Scientific, 2025).

Yet, these alliances also contribute to regional polarization. While they reassure US partners, they reinforce Chinese narratives of containment and

alliances that enhance operational interoperability and collective defense. Rather than seeking direct confrontation, Washington employs visible military signaling such as freedom of navigation operations to reinforce international maritime norms while constraining China's ability to unilaterally alter the regional status quo (Lawrence et al., 2019, pp. 1–5).

However, this strategy carries inherent risks. The growing frequency of close encounters between US and Chinese forces underscores the potential for escalation driven by miscalculation rather than intent. From a strategic perspective, deterrence in this context functions less as a stabilizing mechanism and more as a continuous test of resolve, reflecting the erosion of mutual strategic trust between the two powers (Akhtar, 2024).

4.2 Alliance Politics and Minilateral Adaptation

In parallel with military deterrence, the United States has prioritized alliance consolidation through flexible minilateral

encirclement. This dynamic suggests that alliance-building, while effective in strengthening deterrence, simultaneously intensifies the security dilemma that characterizes US–China relations in the Indo-Pacific (Lawrence et al., 2019, pp. 16–20)

5. Economic Dimensions of Strategic Competition

5.1 Trade Conflict and Economic Statecraft

Economic interdependence between the United States and China has not mitigated strategic rivalry; instead, it has become a domain of contestation. Trade disputes and tariff escalation since 2018 illustrate how economic instruments are

increasingly deployed as tools of statecraft. US concerns over intellectual property protection and market distortions reflect deeper anxieties regarding long-term technological and strategic dependence (Lawrence et al., 2019, pp. 1–5).

The targeting of Chinese technology firms exemplifies this shift toward securitization of economic policy. These measures signal a departure from liberal assumptions that economic integration fosters political convergence, revealing instead a competitive logic in which economic resilience is treated as a component of national security (Akhtar, 2024).

5.2 Supply Chains and Strategic Vulnerability

The reconfiguration of global supply chains highlights the systemic implications of US–China rivalry. Efforts to diversify production and reduce reliance on China reflect an emerging emphasis on resilience rather than efficiency. This transformation demonstrates how geopolitical risk has become a central consideration in corporate and governmental decision-making (Lawrence et al., 2019, pp. 6–10).

China's assertive behavior in critical maritime corridors further reinforces these concerns, linking freedom of navigation directly to economic security. As a result,

supply chains are increasingly understood not merely as economic networks but as strategic assets vulnerable to geopolitical disruption.

6. Diplomatic and Regional Responses

6.1 Institutional Mediation and Normative Contestation

Multilateral institutions remain essential yet constrained arenas for managing US–China rivalry. ASEAN's consensus-based diplomacy provides a mechanism for de-escalation, allowing smaller states to maintain strategic autonomy. However, its limited enforcement capacity restricts its ability to address coercive practices effectively (Akhtar, 2024).

At the global level, competition within institutions such as the United Nations reflects a broader struggle over norms and governance. Both powers seek to shape institutional outcomes in ways that reinforce their strategic preferences, reducing the scope for neutral mediation (World Scientific, 2025).

6.2 Regional Hedging and Strategic Autonomy

Regional actors adopt hedging strategies that reflect both opportunity and vulnerability. While economic ties with China remain essential, concerns over coercion and territorial disputes drive continued security engagement with the United States. This balancing behavior illustrates the agency of middle and small powers in navigating great-power rivalry

rather than merely reacting to it (Lawrence et al., 2019, pp. 21–25).

7. CONCLUSION

The US China rivalry in the Indo Pacific has emerged as a central axis of contemporary international politics, reshaping patterns of security, diplomacy, and economic interaction across the region. This article has shown that the intensification of strategic competition is not the result of isolated policy choices but rather the cumulative effect of long term structural shifts, including China's expanding capabilities and the United States' efforts to preserve rules based regional order. These developments have generated a strategic environment marked by persistent uncertainty, where cooperation and confrontation coexist in uneasy tension.

The analysis indicates that regional stability is increasingly influenced by the interaction between military deterrence and diplomatic restraint. While enhanced military deployments and alliance networks have contributed to balancing power asymmetries, they have also heightened the risk of miscalculation, particularly in contested spaces such as the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. At the same time, regional actors continue to pursue pragmatic strategies aimed at avoiding binary alignment, reflecting a broader desire to maintain autonomy amid intensifying great power rivalry.

From a broader perspective, the Indo Pacific rivalry extends beyond regional boundaries and carries significant implications for the future of international

security governance. Multilateral institutions and normative frameworks remain relevant but face growing constraints as strategic competition limits their capacity to mediate disputes effectively. The evidence suggests that sustained stability will depend not solely on deterrence mechanisms but on the willingness of both powers to engage in managed competition, reinforce communication channels, and recognize the costs of unchecked escalation.

In this sense, the US China rivalry should be understood not merely as a confrontation between two states but as a test of the adaptability of the international system itself. Whether this rivalry evolves into a stabilizing balance or a source of systemic disruption will depend on how successfully strategic competition is reconciled with cooperation on shared global challenges. The outcome will shape not only the security architecture of the Indo Pacific but also the broader trajectory of global order in the decades ahead.

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