

## Rise of China and its Implications on the Geo-Strategic Transformation of the Indo-Pacific Region

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines China's rise and its impact on the geo-strategic transformation of the Indo-Pacific region and the Western-led order, using the Balance of Power Theory. Strategic challenges in Southeast Asia have intensified as the US and China compete economically and militarily. The research analyzes power, domination, alliances, and partnerships, identifying four major trends in the Indo-Pacific: a gradual shift in the global order, a shift in economic and political power from West to East, the rise of the global South, and the emergence of a multipolar order. These trends signal significant changes in international power dynamics. China aims to lead the global South toward a multipolar order and reduce the influence of the Western-led order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where it seeks regional dominance. According to the Balance of Power Theory, states form alliances in economic, trade, and military spheres to counter adversaries. Robert Gilpin notes that great powers may go to war to achieve a balance of power and establish a new order, though current rivals are avoiding direct conflict. China counters US influence through the BRI, economic investments, and partnerships, while the US contains China through its Indo-Pacific Strategy and strengthens alliances such as QUAD, AUKUS, and I2U2 to balance China's power in Southeast Asia. Neither the US nor China currently dominates the region, as ASEAN states pursue hedging and balancing strategies. Should Southeast Asia states align more closely with either power, the balance in the Indo-Pacific could shift.*

**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, US-China competition, balance of power, China rise, hedging policy

### INTRODUCTION

China has emerged as a revisionist power in the Indo-Pacific region, posing a challenge to the United States' hegemony in the international system. Many analysts, political scientists, strategists, and the US allied nations used the phrase 'revisionist power' in documents. John Mearsheimer argued that China is rising and a challenging power, (Schmidt, 2013), and naturally used its economic power to military power and challenges the US influence and order in the Indo-Pacific region, (Mearsheimer J. , 2013). In 2017 National Security Strategy, Donald Trump named China as a revisionist power, (House W. , 2017), and 2018 National Defense Strategy reveals China challenge to the US interest in the Indo-Pacific region, (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019). Graham Allison a realist theorist in the 'Thucydides trap' considered China a revisionist power and threat to the US status quo power and seeks to change the order, (Allison, 2015).

The US-China competition is analyzed with the theory of 'balance of power' and provides answers to

questions that relate to China's rise and increase in its influence through investment, and the US counter-strategies, alliances, and trade initiatives. The main discussion is on the implications of China's rise in the Indo-Pacific Region. Who will win in the Indo-Pacific region? According to the balance of power theory, states balance the power of the challenger state by evolving their alliances and partnerships in the economy, trade, military, and soft power. States are making defensive and offensive alliances to counter the power of an aggressive opponent state.

Strategically, the Indo-Pacific region is significant for the great powers due to its rapid economic growth, making it a hub of global trade. This region is home to the top rising economies, China, the US, India, Japan, Australia, and Korea. Principally, the region contributes to world GDP, and holds vital importance due to maritime trade, security of shipping, Sea lines, Straits such as the Malacca Strait. In 2022, the US government gained more than \$2 trillion through trade with the Indo-Pacific region, and the US received \$956 billion in foreign direct investment. It is the US plan to increase its trade with the Indo-Pacific states, which boosts the US economy and the prospects of its citizens, (House, 2023).

China is shaping the world through its strategies and seeking to transform the global and economic order in the international system. China is building its commercial and naval bases in the Indian Ocean and extending its diplomatic ties with Myanmar, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. China's 'String of Pearls' strategy has security and political implications for the Indo-Pacific region. The construction of ports such as Gwadar port in Pakistan provides China with easy access to the Arabian Sea, by-passing the Malacca Strait. The Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, the Kyaukpju port in Myanmar, and the Chittagong port in Bangladesh are strategically important for China. These ports provide China with a foothold and access in the Indian Ocean and important economic corridors in the Indo-Pacific, (Kumari, 2023).

Since 2013, the number of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) member states has increased, and by 2025, it had expanded to 149 countries (Urban, 2025). China's presence in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in Southeast Asia, escalates the strategic competition with the US, European powers, and India. In 2022, President Biden unveiled the Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China. The US is containing China through its Indo-Pacific strategy and alliance network. To challenge and restrain China in the Indo-Pacific region, the US established AUKUS, QUAD, and I2U2 alliances, (US.gov, 2022).

China has modernized its military and showcased its military power on 3 September 2025 on the Victory Day celebration; and many heads of state attended the victory day, including President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's President Kim Jong-Un. President Xi Jinping proudly exhibited his Autonomous weapons, drones, laser weapons, Nuclear Missiles, Intercontinental Missiles, Ballistic missiles, Hypersonic Missiles, and modern aircraft. Chinese technology is well-known for its significance and advancement, and it has become widely recognized after the war between India and Pakistan in May 2025. (Davidson.H, 2025).

In the Indo-Pacific region, the rival power that adopts the most effective strategy will win and overcome the opponent's offensive and defensive strategies. The centre of competition is Southeast Asia, ASEAN states, and in the region, neither China nor the US has complete influence, and the US is present in the region as a leading power. ASEAN states have adopted a balancing policy, which means they have to avoid great powers' competition but balance their relations and gain economic benefits. In Southeast Asia, the great power that adopts a better strategy earns the approval and favor of Southeast Asian states, and it will shift the balance of power in the region. Therefore, the US and China are increasing their partnership and alliances in the region to establish a power equilibrium and dominate the Indo-Pacific region.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND MATERIAL**

It is a qualitative research, and methodology based on the review of secondary data. The secondary data was extracted from research publications, policy reports, official statements, and books. The US-China competition is viewed through the prism of the 'balance of power theory'. China is a rising power and supports multilateralism to shape the international system and transform the global order by building economic alliances and partnerships to balance the US hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific region. Whereas the US is also building alliances to balance China's power in the region.

### **Does Revisionist Power Impact through Development Projects?**

China is a revisionist power, and the phrases 'revisionist power' and 'challenger' are used by government policy makers, analysts, and political scientists in their books and official documents. In 2017, President Trump labeled China a revisionist power in the National Security Strategy report, (House W. , 2017), and the 2018 National Defense Strategy report highlighted China as a challenge to the US interest in the Indo-Pacific region, (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019). Graham Allison, (Allison G. T., 2017), argued in his book 'Destined for War' the 'Thucydides trap' that China is a rising power and a challenge to the US status quo power and seeks to change the world order, (Allison, 2015). According to Mearsheimer, China is a rising power and is challenging the US interest in geopolitics, (Schmidt, 2013). Mearsheimer argued that China obviously used its economic power to military power and challenged the US power and order in the Indo-Pacific region, (Mearsheimer J. , 2013).

As a revisionist power, China has challenged the US status quo in the Indo-Pacific region and the liberal order, seeking to transform the liberal order in its favor and endeavour to shift the balance of power, (He, 2023). China challenged the US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region and hierarchical order in the international system, (Panda, 2021). In the world, different scholars study the US-China strategic competition in the context of power, global shift in global power and economic system to alter the order in international system, (Powers, 2023).

State behaviour and strategy changes with economic power, wealth, technology, and military power. Power transforms the policy and conduct of the state, but power not only changes the demeanor of the state; it also changes the conduct of the other states. States may join together in groups to gain power through high-tech weapons, the balance of power, alliances, partnerships, and diplomatic relations. China, Russia, and other states acquired expertise in technology, gained economic power, and emerged as revisionist states to change the geopolitical order, (Rubina, 2024).

Today, the BRICS states, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, are the revisionist powers that challenge the US dollar's stability, avoid dependence on the US dollar, and recommend trade in local currencies and the Chinese Yuan. China is struggling to unite the Global South through the BRICS, which will impact the security influence in geopolitics, (Alam, 2024).

According to the World Bank's 2022 report, the BRICS member countries constitute 25.7% of global GDP. The partners' membership has increased from Africa to Asia; trade and gains are expected to increase to the trillion-dollar mark. In 2023, 3.3 billion people live in the BRICS states, and the most populous countries, China and India, are members of BRICS. In 2023, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran joined the BRICS membership, and that will increase oil production, trade, and sales of the member states, (Rubina, 2024).

In 2009, BRICS was established by Brazil, China, India, and Russia. In 2001, the term and idea of BRIC was first forwarded by Jim O'Neil, a Goldman Sachs economist, who published in a research paper titled 'Building better global economic', (O'Neill, 2001). In 2011, South Africa joined BRICS. In 2024-2025, six countries joined: Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, to get economic and political benefits. The BRICS is strengthening the 'Global South', enhancing alliances with developing countries, and strengthening the BRICS bloc through alliances to govern the global growth, (Afota, 2024).

According to the theory of realism, states have voracity for power, and states expand their power to control the resources and territory of weak states. Organski and Morgenthau stated that power is the chief variables that influence international politics, (Organski, 1968). States conduct and operate according to their power and hierarchical order, as great powers, middle powers, and small powers. Powers act in the international system according to their relative power and influence in the geo-economic international system, (Beardsley, 2020). According to international relations, the great powers are making the rules, norms, geo-economic system, and institutions in their favour, (Gibbons, 2024).

In the international system and Indo-Pacific, China's rise is a Challenge to the US influence. China's assertive foreign policy, economic growth, and modern military are a challenge to the US, (Peters, 2025). China has challenged the IMF, World Bank, and the UN by establishing parallel organizations. China has established many banks to fund the global development projects. In 2023, at the G20 summit, the US and the European powers took the initiative to challenge the rising power of China in South Asia and the Middle East. The US and its partners initiated the new India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) to develop the trade infrastructure and enhance connectivity, (Shi, 2025).

China is reaching out to Southeast Asian states through its development projects, investment, and building the infrastructure of the ASEAN states. It has increased the economic interdependence between ASEAN and China, (Masatoshi, 2024). It is China's ambition to build the Silk Road for trade and connectivity. Beijing is building a railway network from China to Laos and extending it to all the ASEAN states. The cooperation between China through railway, road, and ports will bring affluence, stability, and exchange of technology and it will upgrade the whole region. The construction of roads and railways in Southeast Asia will provide opportunities for landlocked countries to trade with the regional states and gain economic stability, (Masatoshi, 2024).

China has penetrated the Indo-Pacific through the Belt and Road Initiative BRI, a global development economic project, especially in Southeast Asia. China has invested in the Southeast Asian states in infrastructure development, such as roads, railways, ports, and energy pipelines. China, Russia, and partner states of revisionist states are revisionist because they want to change the order in the international system, challenge the US status quo, influence, and liberal order, and wish to change the liberal order in their favour, (HTWE, 2024).

### **China's Development Projects in the Indo-Pacific Region are a Step toward a Global Shift**

China's rise in the geopolitics of Indo-Pacific is a step towards a shift in the global order, a shift in the global economic and political order from West to East, impacting the global South, and the multi-polar order. That is the cause of a transformation in international power dynamics. China's rise is fast, but the shift in the international system is slight and dramatic.

China's ascent in the Indo-Pacific region is changing the global order, power dynamics from a West-centric system to a complex multi-polar order. In the 21st century, China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific

region is a challenge to the global governance structure, international norms, rules, and institutions established by the US-led Western powers after World War II. China is challenging through its extended role and influence in global trade, global politics, and through its global development initiative in Southeast Asia. Directly and indirectly, China is asserting its influence and campaigning for reforms through its role in the international system, which imbalances the power dynamics in the geopolitics of Indo-Pacific, (ul Hamid, 2025).

China is shaping global trade and regional dynamics through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure program that includes roads, railways, and ports. The BRI is designed to promote prosperity, connectivity, supply chains, alliances, and sustainable growth, (Gao, 2018), enhancing trade and economic interdependence, (Bharti M. S., 2024). The primary regions affected by China are Asia, Eurasia, and the Indo-Pacific, all notable for their populations, economic development, and pivotal roles in global commerce and politics. China's influence extends through leadership in multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, which encourage cooperation and offer alternatives to Western-led economic institutions. While the BRI operates globally, organizations like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). There are also regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) that support regional development. In this context, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), Quad as a response to these initiatives. The US and G7 countries are offering alternatives to contain the non-Western framework and to build a better world. The main argument is that China's BRI and related economic organizations are transforming global and regional economic structures, providing alternatives to Western institutions and influencing key regions, (do Nascimento, 2025).

The US unipolar order is under challenge because in Asia, China, India, and other powers are rising as economic powers and challenging the traditional Western economic dominance. Enlargement of BRICS is the rise of a multi-lateral order, which means the multi-polar order is rising in the international system and reshaping the framework of world order, (Wso, 2025). Power is shifting out from the United States to multiple powers in the geopolitical system. In the world, three powers are impacting the geopolitical system: the US, China, and Russia. China and Russia are revisionist powers, and they are struggling to change the international system. China and Russia are major members of BRICS and seek to challenge the US dollar's dominance, and expect to trade in the local currencies of member states, (Alrefai, 2024). Russia's attack on Ukraine challenges the European powers, and at the same time, China and Russia support Iran against the US and Israel policies, (Rimanelli, 2024).

China aspires to lead the global South to a multi-polar order, (Dunford, 2024). China is developing alliances and partnerships through economic initiatives, defense ties, and the BRI global development initiative, (Oluyemi, 2025). China has developed strong economic and defense ties with Pakistan, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and is also extending its relations with other states, (Rasool, 2025). China is balancing the US hegemonic power through its BRI economic initiative and alliances, (Rasool, 2025). China is influencing the Indo-Pacific region by the partnerships and alliances, and promoting multilateralism to challenge the US interest and order. China is an economic stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific region, but that system is not offering maximum incentives to China. Therefore, China is challenging the US order in this region, (Wei, 2024).

While the US is also neutralizing China's power through its economic initiative and strategic alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, (Bharti, 2023). This indicates that the great powers are engaged in strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region, and due to that, the global order is transforming, (Maity, 2025). The unipolar order is under challenge, because the multi-polar order is rising in the international system.

China and Russia are revisionist powers; they are seeking to shift the global system in their favour. (Ikenberry G. J., 2024).

A 2023 European Parliament report highlights the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. China has implemented a range of strategies to advance global development projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Indo-Pacific Strategy of China is structured around economic, diplomatic, and military. China utilizes economic diplomacy, diplomatic engagement, and naval presence to expand its influence in the region. The BRI serves as a strategic instrument for achieving economic and security objectives, notably through the establishment of a 'string of pearls'—a network of naval bases in the Indian Ocean. These bases are intended to facilitate maritime trade and reinforce China's maritime power and security in the Indian Ocean, (Ulrich., 2023).

In the research study title '*The Dragon's Pearls: Decoding the Chinese Strategy for the Indian Ocean,*' Andrew Porter stated that Beijing is constructing its naval bases in the Indian Ocean. The Indo-Pacific region is the focus of China's foreign policy due to its economic growth, vital waterways, oil economy, trade, and strategic interests. Beijing prepared and modernized its blue water navy to shield waterways and its trade in the Indo-Pacific, (Porter, 2020).

China's emergence and its influence in the Indo-Pacific are a cause of concern for the US and Western States. The Western powers observed that Beijing is building a naval force and constructing naval ports near the Strategic Sea lanes, such as the Strait of Malacca, (Choudhary, 2023). The great powers are competing in the region to get the utmost economic advantage and regional dominance, (Ian, 2025).

### **Economic Implication's:**

The Indo-Pacific region holds strategic importance and is a hub of trade and economic activity. The fastest-growing economies are in the region, such as China, the US, India, Japan, Australia, and Korea. The Indo-Pacific region also contributes more than 60% to the world GDP. This region's significance has been enhanced due to China's rise and strategic competition between the US and China, (Prakash, 2023).

China's economic influence has increased in the region because of BRI projects. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not only a commercial tool for economic benefit, but it has also constructed a way for China around the globe. China is building Ports in Indo-Pacific states such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Djibouti, and Pakistan; the ports are used for commercial trade and for military purposes to safeguard its political, economic, and strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region, (Butt, 2021).

Washington and Beijing's strategic competition is transforming the socio-economic and security paradigm of the region. However, competition has brought connectivity, trade, and economic opportunities in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands. The rival powers brought economic prospects for the regional economic growth, but it needs to be sustained for sustainable growth. This region is significant for both powers due to trade and strategic prospects (Tokola, 2024). Therefore, in 2022, the US revealed its 'Roadmap for a 21st-Century US-Pacific Island Partnership', Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which includes \$ 800 million in assistance for the US-Pacific Islands, (Nath, 2023).

There are ten busiest ports along the shores of the Pacific and Indian Ocean, and more. More than half of the world's petroleum passes through the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is a hub for oil cargo transportation; therefore, China seeks to maintain its influence in the region through its infrastructure development projects. China is constructing ports in partner states to increase its trade and economic benefits. China has two main objectives in the Indo-Pacific: one to gain financial leverage through trade,

and the second is to dominate the region through investment and its navy. China's economic strength depends on trade routes, so China made trade agreements with Southeast Asian States and extended its BRI global development programme in the region, (Green, 2018). China and the US are building coalitional alliances to enhance their influence in the Indo-Pacific region, (Loke, 2025).

### **Military Implications**

Beijing is enhancing its military influence in the Indian Ocean, particularly in the South China Sea and East China Sea. China's military operations and drills have increased in the Indian Ocean; the military drills and presence in the region are aiming to gain its strategic vital interests in the Indo-Pacific region. China modernized its military power and expanded its well-equipped navy in the Indo-Pacific region. China has tightened its grip on the Indian Ocean, and that is shifting the balance of power in the region, but they are struggling to maintain the balance of power in their favour, (Rasool, 2025)

China's main strategy is to achieve its vital interests and objectives through its naval power and coalition alliances, (Loke, 2025). The military strength is as important as the economy; China's economy directly depends on the trade routes. If trade routes are blocked, China's economy will suffer. The trade routes are the lifeline of China's economy. Therefore, China builds a strong army to protect its vital interests and increases its presence in the Indo-Pacific region to protect important Sea lanes, specifically to protect the energy supply lines through the Strait of Malacca. However, China's presence in the Indo-Pacific region impacts the regional security, (Green, 2018). China's rising influence in the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca is a cause of anxiety in regional powers such as Japan, Australia, the US, and India. India fears that China may extend and escalate in the Indian Ocean and in the Himalaya to gain rare earth metals and capture the territory, (Hossain, 2024).

China is building ports in the Indian Ocean to defend its maritime trade and strategic interests. It is a challenge to India and other regional powers in the Indian Ocean. China's influence has increased in the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka due to its Infrastructure development and investment in the region. However, it gives China strategic leverage in the future, (Pankaj, 2026), (Pankaj, 2026). (The author and publisher used the date 2026, published by Rutledge India

### **Development of Ports in the Indo-Pacific**

According to Mahan's theory of Sea dominance, China is extending its power in the Indo-Pacific and expanding its maritime trade, the Belt and Road Initiative BRI global development program, in Southeast Asia. Therefore, China is building Ports in developing states of the Indo-Pacific region, which is a plan to boost connectivity and trade through roads, railways, and Sea. In the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia and South Asia are the major centers of these development projects, (Nguyễn, 2024). (Narvenkar, 2025) .

According to the World Bank 2019 report, the China BRI program is effective because 7.6 million people came out of poverty and 32 million from moderate poverty. In 2019, the BRI projects began in 70 countries, whereas in 2025, more than 140 countries joined the BRI membership. The development of roads, railways, and ports will reduce travel time and cost. According to the research, the constructed roads reduce 25% time and cost, and 5% in sea transport, (Maliszewska, 2019).

China's elevation as an economic and military power is a threat and challenge to the US and European powers in the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing is building Ports in the partner states such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. China is building ports in the Indo-Pacific region to facilitate trade ships and avoid the direct dependence on the Strait of Malacca. China conducts 80 percent of its oil imports through

the Malacca Strait, and therefore, China is in search of alternative Sea routes, (Lambert A. &., 2025). Financial gain is the major factor that engaged China in the Indian Ocean, strategically Southeast Asia, and South Asia are important for China's trade, and this is the reason China is building ports in the Indo-Pacific region, (Blanchard, 2024). (Narvenkar, 2025)

The idea of the Maritime Silk Road is effective for the enhancement of 'port alliances', fastest transportation, trade, and security. The construction of Ports in the Indo-Pacific region is the cause of competition, but it also enhances sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region. The ports and roads are helping China to expand its BRI economic projects, and access to the fossil fuel and rare earth metals, which have increased China's foreign direct investment FDI, (Sun T. N., 2024). (Wang C. H., 2021)

### **Hambantota international Port:**

Strategically, Hambantota Sea Port is significant for China in the Indo-Pacific region. It is in Sri Lanka, and China established its foothold in the Bay of Bengal. Hambantota Port is located on the East-West shipping route. It is a well-constructed deep port and can manage various cargo and warships. The Hambantota Port is significant due to its proximity to the strategic straits and economic corridors, (Jaleel, 2023).

Primarily, the port was constructed and developed for commercial reasons, and it is assumed that China may use the port for military purposes, yet the government of Sri Lanka did not permit China to use the port for military purposes. Hambantota Port is near the key shipping routes, and in the future, it will be a hub of international trade. The investment in the Hambantota Port is to expand its trade worldwide, and it provides China with easy access to the Indian Ocean., (Rosendal, 2025) . (Mboya, 2025).

China achieved economic and geopolitical targets through its investment in the Hambantota port. China is functioning according to its strategy in the Indo-Pacific region; the key strategy is to enhance its maritime power through building a 'string of pearls. It is enhancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, and China aims to rise as a hegemonic power. China's rise and presence in the Indian Ocean is a direct challenge to India and a challenge to the US hegemony, (Mboya, 2025).

Due to political chaos and mismanagement, it was not easy for the Sri Lankan government to pay back the loan, which led to a 99-year lease agreement. Many scholars have condemned China's loan policy, considering it a debt trap. Constantine Xavier called it 'modus operandi', (Jones, 2020). He stated that it's China's strategy to provide enormous loans to developing states, and when these states are unable to reimburse, it traps them in heavy loans. In this way, China is manipulating developing states through a comprehensive project on its own favorable terms, (Jones, 2020). However, the lease agreement is in favor of Sri Lanka and China, because the lease agreement helps to direct its debt and get the benefit of the port, and gradually pay back the loan, (Senevirathna, 2024).

### **Gwadar Port**

Gwadar port holds a geo-strategically significant location, and it has enhanced the interdependence between Pakistan and China, (Asif, 2016) .China and Pakistan are bonding through a strategic, friendly neighborhood relationship. Since 2002, China has been the investor and developer of the Gwadar Seaport. Strategically, the Gwadar port is significant for Pakistan and China because it connects the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and Central Asia, (Rahman, 2024).

The Gwadar Port will enhance Pakistan's economic and naval position in the region, and it can also be used as a naval base during conflict with India (khan, 2024). Gwadar port is a noteworthy component of the Belt and Road Initiative BRI and a necessary part of the Pakistan Economic Corridor. The completion of the project will boost economic activities in Baluchistan, and it provides access to the landlocked states of Central Asia., (khan, 2024).

The construction of Gwadr port provides strategic leverage to China and Pakistan; China's Maritime influence is extended and enhanced in the western Indian Ocean. Pakistan is struggling to emerge as a middle power and take advantage of its strategic location. Pakistan is at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, and can connect to the European states. Pakistan has also joined the economic projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC, Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO, Pakistan joined SCO in 2017, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) ECO Pakistan joined in 1964 and other economic forums to increase its regional connectivity through trade routes, land routes, and water. The Gwadar port will play a significant role in the uplift of Pakistan's economic growth, (Maqsood, 2025).

Gawadr port provides an easier, safer, shorter access to the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and Europe, bypassing the Malacca Strait, and it will reduce China's dependence on the Malacca Strait. Gawadr port also provides access to China in the Arabian Sea, to project its power and monitor the naval navigation of India and the US. China's industries are dependent on oil energy from the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, and the Gawadr port can provide Chinese ships with a safe route to the Persian Gulf.. (Habibi, 2023)

## **Djibouti**

Djibouti is a small country in Africa, and it is bordered by Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Djibouti remained a colony of France, and in 1977, it gained independence. Djibouti remained close to France due to financial aid and a military agreement. However, global political changes transformed Djibouti's foreign policy. In 1999, Omar Guelleh came to power, and during his rule, Djibouti followed multilateralism and enhanced its diplomatic relations with foreign states to gain political and economic benefits, (Çalışkan, 2023) .

Djibouti came into the focus of great powers, especially after the 9/11 attacks. In 2002, the United States of America established its military base in Djibouti to continue its global war on terror. Afterwards, other countries also established their military bases in Djibouti; currently, there are eight countries' military bases, including those of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, India, and China. After the establishment of foreign military bases, Djibouti's strategic and financial position became better, because the military bases are a source of income for the country, (Ali, 2025) .

Djibouti is becoming a center of strategic attention for foreign militaries due to the important Sea routes. In 2017, China established its first support military base in Djibouti. The base is significant for China because it is near the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden. It is important because it provides China with easy access to the oil market, Asia, Africa, and Europe, (Masuda, 2023).

In the Indian Ocean, Djibouti is an important port for global powers like China and the United States. Strategically, Djibouti is important because of its proximity to the tactical Sea lines of communication SLOCs, Straits, such as the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden, and the rich Arabian Peninsula (Lawale, 2023). China can protect its strategic and economic interests in the Indian Ocean; Djibouti is an important port for China, (Badawi, 2024).

Djibouti is full of risk and challenges due to the global powers' strategic interests that lie in the same region.

China has an assertive strategy in the South China Sea and the East South China Sea, and an assertive foreign policy with its rival states. At the same time, China has assertive behaviour with Taiwan and India. While the US is present in the region with its Indo-Pacific Strategy to 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. Djibouti is a place of opportunities for trade and cooperation, but conflict is probable. (Nkala, 2023).

### **Kyaukpyu Port, Myanmar**

Myanmar shares a long land border with China, and the two states share cordial relations. China accesses the Bay of Bengal through the Myanmar territory via the Belt and Road Initiative BRI, strategic constructions, without entering into India's exclusive economic zone. It is China's vital interest to build a deep port in Kyaukpyu. Kyaukpyu Port is in Myanmar; it holds a significant strategic importance for Myanmar and China. According to China's 'Middle Kingdom' concept, it is China's ambition to rise as a great power in the Indo-Pacific Ocean, which is the basic motivation for China to build naval ports in the Indian Ocean to influence the Indo-Pacific and enhance its trade, (CHOUDHURY, 2024).

In 2011, construction of Kyaukpyu was initiated, and it was completed in 2013. Kyaukpyu Port is an important project of the Belt and Road Initiative BRI. The Kyaukpyu Port provides direct access to China in the Indian Ocean. China has invested heavily in the construction of Kyaukpyu Port to import oil safely to the provinces of China, (Myoe, 2024).

China is developing ports in the Indian Ocean to avoid dependence on the Malacca Strait. In the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca is near India, and in case of conflict, India can block the Malacca Strait. China has developed the Kyaukpyu Port to bypass the Strait of Malacca, (CHOUDHURY, 2024). China is developing strategic infrastructure in the backyard of India, and it is a challenge to India. India and China are struggling to maintain their hegemony in the Indian Ocean, and that is the reason for the contestation between China and India, and it is also a cause of anxiety to the US and European Powers in the Indian Ocean., (Balakrishnan, 2024) . (Vázquez.G., 2023) .

China is investing and developing the infrastructure in Myanmar to make a smooth trade transit via the Kyaukpyu Port; it's not only used to import oil but to export goods from China to the Middle East, and to the states along the crossroad of the Indo-Pacific region. China and Myanmar's diplomatic and economic relations improved due to infrastructure development. Myanmar is a developing state, and the port offers job opportunities to local people, which will reduce political instability in Myanmar. It may bring social, economic, and political uplift in Myanmar. In the future, the Kyaukpyu Port may offer logistic support, a place to renovate the vessels, and to fix the military installations. This is the cause of anxiety and a challenge to the Western and regional states, (Vázquez.G., 2023) .

China is not only developing the Kyaukpyu port, but it plans to develop the railway, pipelines, and industrial areas beside the port. Kyaukpyu port provides China with strategic leverage in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, and due to its deep-sea connectivity, the industrial area is expected to grow, benefiting both China and Myanmar, especially as it develops Myanmar's Rakhine State, and that will also impact the regional states around. However, according to the United States Institute of Peace for Myanmar (USIP) (2018), the United States government criticized China's investment in Myanmar because China can use the seaport for military purposes, (Oo, 2025).

The four important developments can be seen through the development of the Kyaukpyu seaport.

- i- The Economic Zone can bring prosperity to Myanmar and can facilitate China's supply chains

ii-Regional connectivity

iii- It provides China with direct access to the Indian Ocean.

iv- The Kyaukphyu seaport ends China's dependence on the Malacca Strait.

### **BRI in Indo-Pacific**

In 2013, President Xi Jinping began to initiate the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to promote connectivity and economic collaboration around the globe. BRI is an ambitious development strategy, and it is the key point of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy, (Rozman, 2025).

The development of the BRI strategy is uncovered as a policy paradigm that became the framework of China's foreign policy and evolved with time at the domestic and international levels, (Ji, 2024). In 2013, President Xi Jinping argued the main mechanism of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was to develop an 'economic belt' along the Silk Road, with Central Asian partners, and extend it into the Euro-Asia region. After thirty days, President Xi visited Indonesia and addressed parliament, motivating the Southeast Asian states to lend a hand and coordinate with China to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, (Clarke, 2017).

China initiated different financial institutions to support (BRI) projects and also to provide loans to (BRI) member states. China initiated parallel institutions to the US and Western-led liberal organization, such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), Silk Road Fund (SRF), and the National Development and Reform Commission for the implementation of the BRI, (Yu, 2024).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects enhanced China's status in geopolitics as an economic power, but China strengthened its economy, technology, and military power. In the Indo-Pacific region, China has extended its influence in Southeast Asian states through huge investments and infrastructure development. However, China's rise is impacting the regional security and politics, (Li, 2020).

China established a system through financial institutions to support the BRI project and its member states. China has initiated the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) Silk Road Fund (SRF) and the National Development and Reform Commission for the implementation of the BRI. The Chinese government allocated \$40 billion for the Silk Road Economic Belt, \$25 billion for the Maritime Silk Road, \$50 billion for the AIIB, and \$40 billion for the SRF (Clarke, 2017). China's ambition is to rise as a global economic and hegemonic power in the international system and the Indo-Pacific region. China is gradually enhancing its influence in the world. It is China's geopolitical goal to break the US 'encirclement' of influence and discourage India's rise in the Asia-Pacific, (Clarke, 2017). - The US Indo-Pacific strategy in response to China's rise.

Directly and indirectly, China is challenging the US hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific region. In response to China's rise, the US formulated the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. In 2022, US President Biden formulated the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, 'the free and open Indo-Pacific', to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region. According to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US shared its vision of a 'free, open, secure, and resilient' Indo-Pacific. In the Indo-Pacific, there are challenges and opportunities for the US leadership, but it can build a better future with partners and alliances in the Indo-Pacific, (Hiep, 2024).

In the geo-politics of the Indo-Pacific region, China has confronted the US and challenged the US economic interest, military power, and security in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is the core area of strategic

competition among the rival powers to influence the region, (Hu, 2020). To influence the region and contain China, the US is building bilateral and multilateral alliances with regional powers. To counter China's economic and business deals, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The alliances provide political and physical security strength in the region (Uddin, 2023). In the region, Australia, India, and Japan are active states in containing China's rising polices. The US builds QUAD, AUKUS, and I2U2 alliances to limit China and promote the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy, (Hassan, 2025).

However, according to RAND research, currently the US and China compete, but neither has complete influence in the Indo-Pacific region, (Lin B. C., 2020). In the Indo-Pacific region, the Southeast Asian states are not favouring the US-China competition, and they do not want to be part of the competition. The hedging policy of the Southeast Asian states is very strong; they are avoiding the competition of the great powers but getting the material benefit in the form of trade, infrastructure development, and funds. The Southeast Asian states did not give a clear signal to the US and China to be part of the conflict. While a group of business elites did not approve of China's rise or the US dominance, they were in favour of the ASEAN states' dominance in the region, (Hu, 2020).

### **Role of ASEAN States**

In the Indo-Pacific region, Southeast Asia is the center of strategic competition between rival powers. ASEAN states are the main actors in Southeast Asia; their position is very active because they can alter the balance of power if they join either the US or China. The dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region are changing because various powers are taking an interest and becoming stakeholders in the region, (Stewart, 2024).

In the region, there is not only the US-China competition for vital economic interests, but also other global powers, middle powers, and regional powers whose economic interests lie in the Indo-Pacific region. European powers, such as France, the UK, and Italy, are present in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States is present in the region as a superpower defending its status quo and vital interests, while China is a revisionist power and wishes to rise as a global superpower. The US and China are competing for power in the Indo-Pacific region, and both are making alliances to sway the region. It seems that China's authority is rising and the US's weight is declining, but neither China nor the US has complete dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. Though China is rising, the US still has power in most regions because of its military might and active diplomacy, (Lin B. C., 2020).

ASEAN states have adopted a hedging and balancing policy, and it is a very successful strategy. ASEAN states are not becoming part of the strategic competition, but they are getting economic benefits from both rival powers, (Wang P. B., 2024). In 2024, a conference was held at the University of Macau. According to the conference's conclusion, the ASEAN States did not support the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and did not recognize China's hegemony in Southeast Asia. Thus, if ASEAN states join any rival power in the region, it will shift the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region, (Wang P. B., 2024).

### **CONCLUSION**

The US and China are in strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region for economic gain and regional dominance as a hegemonic power. China is a revisionist and rising power and a challenge to the US status quo in the Indo-Pacific region. China enhanced its influence in the Indo-Pacific region through huge economic investment and BRI global infrastructure development projects. China imports energy from the Middle East, with 80% of its oil imports conducted through the Malacca Strait, which is located near India. If India blocks the Malacca Strait, China's industries will suffer. Therefore, China is building ports and military bases in the Indian Ocean. The key objective is to enhance its influence in the Indian Ocean,

enhance its alliances, and gain approval in the Indo-Pacific region. Presently, neither China nor the US has control over the Indo-Pacific region due to the balancing and hedging policy of the ASEAN states. If Southeast Asian states favour either China or the US, it may shift the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. The US is containing China through its Indo-Pacific strategy, while China is gradually challenging the US-led order and seeking to lead the global South in a multipolar order.

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