

**POLITICS OF PACIFIC REGION:
US-CHINA COMPETITION, RISE OF OTHER ACTORS AND
FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR REGIONAL ORDER**

Bilal Habib Qazi¹, Irfan Hasnain Qaisrani², and Hussain Abbas³

*¹Jilin University, ²Bahria University Islamabad,
and ³The Islamia University of Bahawalpur*

Abstract. US alliance politics, especially the AUKUS pact, reinvigoration of QUAD and the rise of other actors like Japan, Australia and ASEAN, have convoluted the geopolitics of the region. China has doubled its efforts to neutralise any adverse effects of the pacts. This study aims at explaining the nature and dynamics of the US and Chinese divergences, strategic partnerships, alliance politics and its implications for the regional order. The study, while adopting the theoretical framework of balancing and content analysis as the methodological tool, hypothesised that the new US partnership strategy of containing China has forced Chinese leaders to proactively pursue competitive countervailing strategies that will implicate the interests of both states. The rise of other actors and strategic alliances/partnerships, created for balancing, will further complicate the regional politics with clear implications for the regional political and economic stability.

Keywords: US-China competition, Indo-Pacific region, geopolitics, great power politics, multipolar moment

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2024.4.01>

Received 5 September 2024, accepted 1 October 2024, printed and available online 10 December 2024

1. Introduction

Sino-US geostrategic competition in the Pacific Region has given rise to complexity in regional politics. The US intends to contain a rising China. But it cannot go alone to achieve this objective; therefore, it has pursued partnerships in the form of the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) pact and QUAD (US, Japan, India, Australia), which are perceived by China as containment efforts against it. On the other hand, in response to it, China – being a responsible power, has been trying to maintain and preserve the existing order in the region. The US, in particular, has been aligning its interests with those of the regional states in the Pacific Region to challenge rising China's behaviour. This strategic move by the US has been answered by Chinese persistent growth and, resultantly, Chinese economic and development collaboration with regional and extra regional states. Chinese discourses like 'community of common destiny' and 'common development' and projects like Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) have brought China more economic and political benefits in the region. These discourses and initiatives are proclaimed by China as beneficial for all and are in contrast to US zero-sum Cold War balancing through alliance strategies. Chinese expansion of economic and political influence has convinced the US leadership to re-orient its long-standing policy of accommodation towards China and pursue an active Grand strategy to abstain from displacing the US preponderant position.

Initially, a rebalancing strategy was adopted under the Obama administration with a clear aim to engage Chinese regional competitors. Since then, successive US administrations have proclaimed alliance strategies to respond to Chinese growth and proactiveness and address the concerns of its allies in the region against perceived China threats. In essence, the efforts are designed to ensure that the states do not slip into the orbit of Chinese influence. QUAD and AUKUS are the new geopolitical and defence strategies to repair the declining US position and a reaction to the ever-expanding Chinese military and political might and presence in the region and beyond. AUKUS is a mini-lateral group of three nations based on several small initiatives for close military and defence coordination and cooperation. It intends to tip the military balance in the Pacific Region in favour of the US against China (Fraser 2022). Major cooperation is evident in maritime security, where the US and UK agreed to enhance Australia's naval power by developing a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. On the other hand, QUAD, another mini-lateral grouping of four like-minded states in the Pacific Region, is not a purely defence pact. It is focused on a greater agenda, including trade, economy, political, diplomatic, and security cooperation. Their shared concern remained China's rise and its behaviour in the region. Various initiatives like high-level engagement, the establishment of working groups and naval cooperation, and the conduct of joint naval exercises define the new direction of cooperation through QUAD. Though the agenda and objectives of the partners are not only specific to China, but the main objective is also to strengthen the capacity and power of the partners to counter Chinese ever-expanding economic, political, and security influence. Where the US has engaged

the allies at political and security levels, China, as the fastest-growing economy and a world trading power with a new Chinese version of socialist order based on the vision of ‘common destiny’, has managed economic interdependence with most of its neighbours (Friedberg 2018: 7-64).

This study aims at exploring the nature and dynamics of US and Chinese interests and divergences in the perception of regional power dynamics, the rise of other actors, and alliance politics. It also endeavours to trace various determining factors that have paved the way for a new US alliance-cum-partnership strategy and defence mechanisms and its implications for Chinese strategic interests and goals of achieving a preponderant position in the region. The study, while adopting the theoretical framework of balancing and content analysis as the methodological tool, hypothesised that the new US partnership strategy of containing China in the region, and the Chinese response to it, to maintain the regional order, will have an impact on the interests of both states. The rise of other actors and strategic alliances/partnerships, created for balancing, will further complicate the regional politics with clear implications for the regional political and economic stability.

2. Discourse debate and strategic balancing: theoretical insights Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific debate

Geographically, the Pacific region and the Indian region have been separated for a long historical period of time. Geopolitical and geostrategic necessities, interests, and discourses have transformed this segregated geographical region into a geostrategic one. The Asia-Pacific Region refers to a geopolitical area defined by its proximity to the Western Pacific Ocean, encompassing a significant portion of East Asia, South Asia, and Oceania. This region is characterised by its diverse cultures, economies, and political systems and plays a crucial role in global economic and strategic dynamics. The Indo-Pacific term first coined by the former Japanese Prime Minister Shizo Abe, and this discourse construction has gained significant attention and acceptance since the proclamation of Indo-Pacific strategy.

The region is home to many rising powers, such as China, India, Australia, and ASEAN as a region. The politics of the region had once revolved around the centrality of ASEAN, but with the rise of China and its competition with the US, new geopolitical conceptualisations have emerged, such as the concept of Indo-Pacific. The National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States of America under the Trump administration has clearly used and defined the Indo-Pacific Region. It referred to the region from the west coast of India to the Pacific shores of the United States as one unit (National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017).

The context of security order regarding Indo-Pacific geostrategy further suggests a growing inclination to adopt a two-ocean rather than a one-ocean strategy paradigm regarding the security dispersion of military assets of major powers in the vast Indo-Pacific realm as a single continuum. Such an approach gives credence to the increasing realisation that competition for major power status among states in

the future will likely play out more in this extensive maritime domain than on land (Liu 2019). It follows therefore that while the term Indo-Pacific may be understood to be an expansive geographic area, it is more significant in transforming global geography as a great power centre of gravitation. Today the Indo-Pacific has become strategically active due to the competition of the great powers' interests and the efforts to implement their goals. The policy of strategic alliances and partnerships that the United States pursues helps to expand or at least retain the United States' influence and contain China's growing influence.

Current geopolitics in the region can best be analysed through the theory of Balance of Power. To have a relative advantage over competitors and to uphold or maintain their security, states ally with other states of the world (Waltz 1979). This theoretical assumption is significantly relevant and explanatory as it provides a lens to understand and evaluate the US politics of strategic partnership and alliance and Chinese proactive responses in the region. Where the US relies on alliances and partnerships, China, through its BRI and other economic and developmental projects, is trying to increase its influence in the region (Cai 2017).

Chinese and US conduct in the wake of new geopolitical realities has a significant impact on the power structure and future trajectory of regional politics. How China and the US define their interests, vision of regional order, and role in the region would determine the contours of the geopolitics of the region. At the secondary level, the power balancing, stability, peace, and tranquillity would also depend on the reactions of the other rising powers, such as Japan, India, and Australia. The US has also strengthened its strategic partnerships with all these and other states of the region, such as the Philippines and Thailand.

Politics in the region has become an example of an action-reaction and tit-for-tat politics largely based on blame-gaming has generated a security dilemma. Since the Obama Administration's Indo-Pacific pivot strategy (Lieberthal 2011), the US has been regarded as a troublemaker by the Chinese. China considers that the American assertive policies and surge in military deployments in the region had shifted the balance of power in the region, thus posing a threat to China and its vital core interests (Chase et al. 2018). It views the deployment of US maritime installations like conventional and nuclear submarines akin to new Cold War-like strategy of arms race and balancing in the region and a clear threat to its core interests in the region. Retrospectively, China has re-organized its navy and re-instituted its defence forces in defence of its core interests in East and South China. It has re-assured its 'one China Policy' and pro-actively emphasized on the security and sovereignty of territorial waters and islands.

3. China's views on regional balancing and alliances

The international relations strategy adopted by China entails exercising restraint in terms of geopolitics and trying to build strategic partnerships mainly on the basis of economic and military cooperation. This has ensured multilateralism and benign

world order, which is also aligned to the Chinese aspirations for promotion and of mutual cooperation and development. Although China's aspirations are global, its most daunting problems are largely regional. Yet, although China's aspirations are global in nature, its most daunting problems are largely regional. The Pacific Region where China has made great strides also happens to be the centre of its most delicate security and sovereignty concerns. The territorial disputes in this region, particularly the ones with the neighbouring countries, and the regional powerhouses like India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia realigning towards deeper engagements with the U.S. have made crafting China's regional strategy all the more complex.

The American shift toward Asia and its rebalancing policies left China's relative regional environment in a more complicated state, enhancing some writers' view of late-sixties Cold War anxiety. The ongoing territorial disputes, supplemented by the United States' increasingly pronounced aspiration to 'rebalance' itself in the Pacific Region, are seen by these authors as serious factors hindering the peace in the region.

Within China's worldview, it strives to complete two major objectives within the Indo-Pacific: the initiation of the concept of common security and the enhancement of the regional security architecture. Brought up by President Xi Jinping in the Fourth Summit of Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2014, the first objective emphasises a fundamental point, which is that the security of all parties should be respected and provided for as the basic premise (China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation 2014). Common security recognises that no nation can seek complete security at the expense of other nations and hence accommodates every nation's legitimate security interests. Comprehensive security means regulation of both military and nonmilitary threats, and it requires all approaches to be used. Cooperative security refers to trust-building measures and conflict resolution in which differences are resolved while enhancing; sustainable security in the context of this region means equilibrium in development and progress made in economic and social domains are consolidated through the endeavours to maintain based on providing security to the nation. This security approach matches with the current flow of globalisation, peace, and the win-win cooperation concept of the region as a people's concern, and in order to deal with political security, directly transferring more effort into cooperation to tackle the problem (China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation 2014).

The second goal involves strengthening the Pacific region's security system. China also aims at creating an effective multi-layer, all-around, and diversified security structure that conforms to the existing realities in the region. No, this strategy is not about eliminating the existing mechanisms. This includes enhancement, upgrades, and modification of existing structures so that every country contributes to the maintenance of peace and order in the region. Establishing such a framework should be a common burden of regional great powers without creating a hostile coalition and enhancing openness. Also, it must be built in a consensus nature, in a stepwise approach over a period, and taking into account only non-traditional security issues (China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation 2014). Furthermore, China stresses the importance of security growing hand in hand with the growth of regional

economies as security and development go hand in hand. So, economic development is preceded by stability, while security provides the necessary conditions for economic development.

All these objectives are harmonised with China's vision of what a peaceful, democratic, cooperative, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region should look like. Politically and economically, security is assured through respect, dialogue, and common development. However, the American within the Southeast and East Asia has to be seen as a challenge for regional peace and security. The network of alliances and military posture that the United States is establishing is seen as one glaring impediment to its quest to dominate the region. Initially, it was against the backdrop of the growing influence of China that the self-containment strategy was initiated. This policy sought to engage more closely with other states in the region to counterbalance China's influence. The United States sought to bring together like-minded countries in order to create a counter-coalition to China's exponential rise. However, in time, this policy has evolved. Recognising that it is not going to solve the problem of China in a healthy manner, self-restraint has given way to forging strong alliances with other nations.

4. US-China competing vision and strategies for the region

China's approach to great power relations prioritizes defensive and non-threatening postures, promoting a comprehensive and cooperative security architecture globally. In both his speeches and his writings, Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of a new kind of cooperative and win-win cooperation between the major powers around the world (Swaine 2015: 1-15). He stressed the significance of developing a new model for interactions between major countries in order to cultivate mutual understanding, respect, and advantages from one another. By putting an emphasis on dialogue and collaboration (Xi Jinping 2015). Xi Jinping has given the international community the assurance that China is a peace advocate that does not have any hegemonic or revisionist goals (Xi Jinping 2015). Rather than focussing on a zero-sum calculation, China's approach to great power relations places an emphasis on a defensive and nonthreatening military posture, as well as a comprehensive and cooperative security architecture for Asia and the world (Swaine 2015: 1-15).

Chinese researcher Zeng (2016: 422-442) evaluates the strategy, arguing that it represents a high-profile Chinese effort to prevent a clash between rising countries and existing hegemony. The discourse of the Community of Common Destiny provides a global viewpoint and an ontology that is beneficial to all parties involved, hence fostering involvement and harmony within the global community. Through this action, it surpasses the zero-sum worldview of the Cold War, which consists of winners and losers. The adoption of the discourse by the United Nations Human Rights Council as a component of its vision and strategy illustrates the council's reach on a worldwide scale (Lams 2018: 387-411). As part of its diplomatic and commercial connections with East Asian states, particularly ASEAN, China is working towards the achievement of this objective.

The end result is that China has high aspirations of achieving a free trade deal with ASEAN, as well as expanded cultural and public diplomacy collaboration through official and non-official channels which includes socioeconomic and financial cooperation, marine cooperative ventures, and increased cooperation in maritime endeavours (Lin 2016). Xi's idea of a Community for Common Destiny envisions a political and security community that binds all of the regional governments in a framework that is interdependent on one another. In the process of accomplishing the goals of a common destiny, Xi Jinping laid the framework for the BRI, the maritime silk route, and free trade agreements. It supports China's leading role in the region, secure it from both internal and external challenges. The idea of Asianness is at the heart of the frameworks that govern communities in the region. During his remarks at the Forum Summit of CICA, Xi Jinping underlined the significance of Asian affairs being dependent on the people of Asia for the purpose of maintaining peace, stability, and security in the area (Xin Jinping 2014).

In addition to interstate and interregional ties, the Common Destiny discourse acknowledges the role that the United Nations plays in the process of establishing a global society that is founded on norms and standards that are participatory. Xi believes that the United Nations, which serves as a global platform for nations, is in a position to play a more improved and substantial role in the preservation of peaceful development in non-traditional security concerns such as cyber security and terrorism (Xi Jinping 2015). He underlined the significance of cyber security, arguing for rules, sovereignty, and transparency, respecting the interests of other nations about the protection of information, and working towards common management goals (Xi Jinping 2015).

China's economic development and its developmental and trade relations Eastern and Central European countries, Africa and Latin America and its presumed efforts for regional integration through BRI has given new impetus to the changes in the global and regional geopolitical landscape. The world financial crisis of the 2008 gave China confidence in its economic system and ability to excel at the international level. It has launched a diplomatic offensive, through which its relations with the outside world at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels have enhanced on a variety of dimensions; political, trade, economic, and even strategic. China's status in the international community has improved. It is aspiring for a new global status. It may have acquired all the characteristics of a state powerful enough to become a great power (Lanteigne 2013).

Economic development matters. China's average economic growth rate in the last four decades remains four times higher than that of the US. It has changed the dynamics of the global economic order with clear implications for the political and security orders (Allison et al. 2022: 1-45). China is projected to surpass the US as the number one economy of the world in the 2030s (Smith 2021). It has already surpassed the US and has become the greatest manufacturing country of the world, as is depicted in Figure 2 (Top 10 manufacturing countries, n.d) (based on the 2019 output) (Richter 2021). It is now the most essential link for the global supply chain and has established itself as the primary engine of the global economic growth

(Allison et al. 2022: 1-45). Figure 1 shows that by 2035 China’s GDP will surpass that of the US by a huge margin.

China under Xi Jinping has shown a keen interest in international politics and considers its role important for the development, peace, and prosperity of the region. It has adopted a more responsible role in the region, especially in the maritime

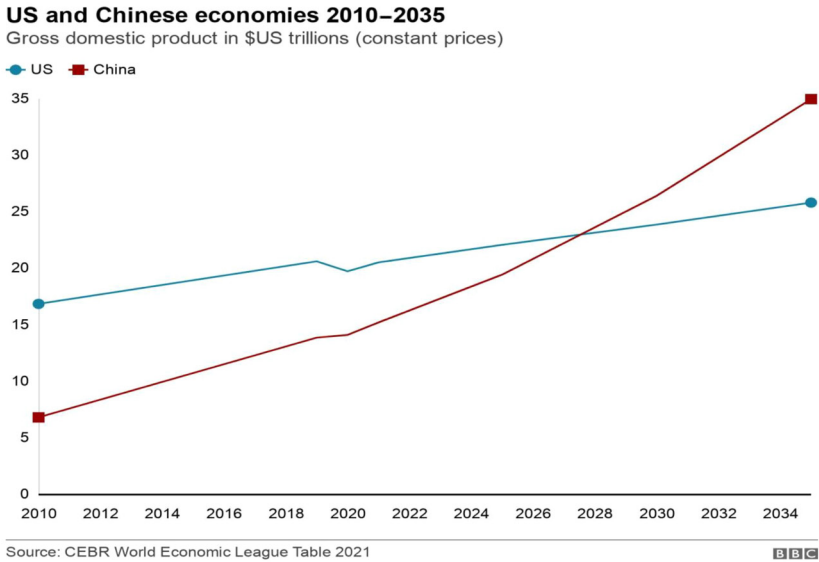


Figure 1. A comparison of US and Chinese economies (British Broadcast Corporation 2020).

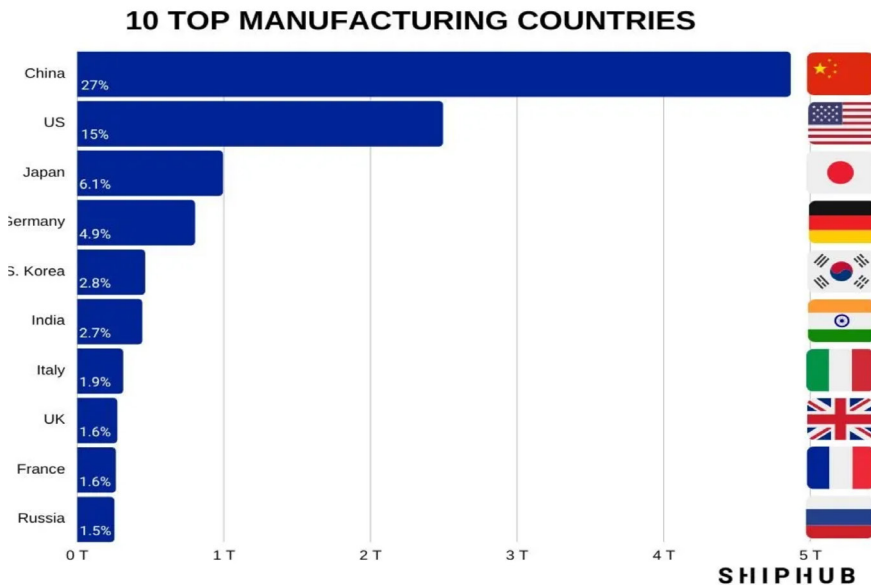


Figure 2. 10 Top Manufacturing Countries in the world (Top 10 manufacturing countries, n.d)

sphere and has been modernising its military capabilities. Its maritime presence in the South and the East China Sea and its vision and strategy has made the US and other regional states concerned about new Chinese grand designs.

The US, after a series of warnings and appeasing acts, has adopted an open path of confrontation since Xi Jinping assumed office, particularly when he announced the policy of the 'Chinese Dream' and 'Rejuvenation of the Nation' in the 18th and 19th Communist Party Congress (Xi Jinping 2012, Mirza and Khan 2020: 22-38). Seeds of confrontation are manifested in the US' NSS 2017. More recently, the US president has imposed a new set of import tariffs worth \$200 billion on China which is regarded as an offensive counter-trade strategy by the US. China also promised 'to take countermeasures' (Doan 2018). This is completely different from what Beijing perceived around nine months ago.

China, consequently, started acquiring more hard power to further secure and preserve its core interests in the region and beyond. The Adherents of Realist discourse in the West regards new powerful China as challenge (Armstrong 1993). The US views China as a challenge due to its rapid rise, its proactive politics to tackle the Asian financial crises and its ties with North Korea are considered as a challenge to US interests (Zhang and Austin 2014).

China in response to the threat theory is more concerned with its image as a responsible great power. Hence the 'rise of China' as a historic opportunity to acquire security, stability, and prosperity for itself and for the region. It further considers the existing regional and world order as exploitative and the establishment of a just order through revision as its prime duty, as President Xi has particularly emphasized the need to avail the historic opportunity to develop common understanding, mutual respect and benefits by creating a new model of major country relations (Jinping 2017: 299).

Chinese leaders and academia believe that justice as the normative principle should be the basic ingredient of international responsibility. According to the report on the works of the government, the Chinese Premier said, "China is a responsible country, it will always stand on the side of peace and stability ... forever be committed to equity and justice ... always work for world peace and contribute to global development" (Keqiang 2017). He further declared that it will "firmly uphold the authority of the multilateral architecture ... oppose protectionism in its different forms, become more involved in global governance, and will make economic activity and development more inclusive, mutually beneficial, and equitable" (Keqiang 2017).

Since its opening up to the world and later with its entry into the World Trade Organization, China has adopted an interest-based approach that is derived from historical experiences and its relations with the great powers. It has learned differently from its socialization with the international community. Kent writes, "it has had a steep learning curve, mediated by its ambitions, changing perceptions and unique perspectives" (Kent 2013). Since the start of the new millennium, it has gained confidence and has started taking responsibility. However, China is facing population pressure, and difficulties in its development path because of uneven growth, and it is still tackling the issues of separatism and terrorism (Wang 1999).

In his speech at the National Security Seminar in 2017, President Xi Jinping emphasized the greater Chinese role at the systemic level. He has vowed that “China should take the lead in shaping the ‘new world order’ and safeguarding international security” (Jinping 2017). This move by Xi was hailed by the Chinese media and analysts as the unprecedented new moment in the Chinese role. They portrayed Xi’s proclamation as the new way forward for the stagnated world order. Xinhua writes by paraphrasing Xi’s speech that “the overall trend of world multi-polarization, economic globalization, and democratization of international relations remains unchanged. We should guide the international community to jointly build a more just and reasonable new world order” (Xi Jinping 2017).

It can also be measured as a profound change because of its contrast to the ‘America First’ policy of President Trump. It has shown an impression that the US is going to reduce its role, and China is willing to take more responsibilities around the globe. President Xi meaningfully reiterated that “the Western-dominated world order is near its end as Western countries are showing less willingness and ability to interfere in global affairs” (Xi Jinping 2017). It can be inferred here that, by and large, China will no more be a silent observer of the happening in the world. Convergences and divergences in US-China relations were a consequence of each state’s calculations of its national interests. For China, this meant a sovereign relationship, not a dependent one. The US had concerns over human rights issues, but this did not push the US to abandon trade and commercial ties with China (Mirza et al. 2020: 40-50).

5. Geopolitics of Pacific Region and divergence of US-China interests

5.1. US interests

Since 2011, the US has adopted the Asia Pivot policy to cater for its international political needs. Successive administrations have taken the Pacific Region and Indian Ocean policy of the previous administration to further extend its presence in the region to safeguard its overarching geopolitical and geoeconomics interests. Its policy remained centred around China and its policies in the region and beyond. The Trump administration has emphasized the Indo-Pacific Region for military deployment and strategic asset enforcement. Trump’s ‘Indo’-Pacific Strategy has adopted a three-dimensional approach. Firstly, by developing policies and instruments to put limits on the ever-expanding regional and global influence of China. Secondly, with the help of the allies maintain sea routes and international communication lines open to avoid any adverse situation and threat to its regional interests and international trade. Finally, provide assurances to the strategic partners in the region and establish a network of defence and strategic partnerships to neutralize any threat from Chinese maritime or aerial forces.

US Indo-Pacific strategy is a reaction to China’s rise. US bi-partisan agreement to counter China remained its prime objective and vital interest to maintain its position and influence in the Pacific Region and check Chinese assertion in the region and beyond with the help of regional allies and strategic partners. It has through various

means started applying pressure on China to respect the existing international order. The change in the power positionality, the rise in China's power and the relative decline in US global superiority, have convinced the US to assertively compete with China in the Pacific Region.

US manoeuvrability is based on the principle of pre-emptily checking the Chinese expanding influence in its backyard. According to Trump's strategy, the US wants to maintain a status quo in the region outlining a vision for open and free navigation, peaceful resolution of conflicts, free and fair-trade deals, and improved connectivity (Pompeo 2019). US rebalancing strategy is a reactive provocation that has made China concerned about the US intentions regarding its regional strategy and specifically its activism in aligning and re-aligning Chinese adversaries into a web of alliance and partnership to contain China.

US' major aim is to balance and even counter the ever-expanding Chinese influence in the region and beyond. Serious efforts have been made to actively engage with China through its expansion of influence, investments, and alliances. Where the US managed to compete with China in the realms of economics, trade and investment, it has exerted enormous political pressure by making alliances at regional and international fora to respect the rules-based order (Feng and He 2017: 23-49). US threat perception about China's policy vision, exponential economic growth and strategy based on South-South cooperation lead its regional policies. Its approach views China through the lenses of zero-sum politics (Diamond 2019).

5.2. Chinese interests

China has become a formidable force that can pilot the geoeconomics and geopolitical trends in the region and beyond. Pacific Region is a vast region where a massive amount of global trade is conducted, and China has become largest trading power of the region. Securing the sea routes for its ever-expanding trade is now among other vital interests of the country. According to The State Council Office of the People's Republic of China, China is firm in upholding its core interests which include the following: state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development (China's Peaceful Development, 2011).

For the sake of Chinese interests, the Chinese leadership has proactively manoeuvred in the region and as a result, its massive initiatives like New Security Concept (NSC), BRI and massive naval modernization in its capabilities and discourse have taken a new direction. This has cautioned its neighbours, especially rivals and major power like the US operating in the region. President Xi stated that "China has a desire for peaceful development and stability with an assertion of the resolute defence of China's core interests, centred on the sovereignty and territorial integrity, security and development" (Xi Jinping 2015). He categorically stressed that China will "never seek hegemony, or commit any kind of expansion, will never seek benefit from others at the expense of others," and "will uphold to the international trading system, participate in global economic governance and pursue mutually

beneficial cooperation and global stability” (Xi Jinping 2015). These discourses have been perceived adversely as a challenge in US. The interpret them in terms of power equation in the region. US Signing of AUKUS and QUAD with regional powers can be taken as concrete empirical evidence in this regard. This has added to the complexity of competitive regional environment.

6. Intensified Sino-US competition: possible scenarios for regional order / disorder

As Chinese discourses and regional policies gained traction under Xi Jinping, US and some powers like Japan and India in the region became fearful of Chinese actions. It is believed by some authors like Boon (2017: 639-622) believe that US massive military presence in Pacific Region, its strategic partnerships with Japan, India and Philippines are threat to Chinese maritime interests in the region.

It is further believed that US policies and acts are based on an effort to provoke China (Boon 2017: 639-622). Chinese nationalism demands a potential response and the pursuance of its core national interests. It is the main source of its neighbourhood policy and great power diplomacy. China has territorial issues with its neighbours. China adopts a non-alliance policy on the rationale that competitive engagement with the US and countering it through an alliance would cause a burden on its economy and would slow down the Chinese pace of the realisation of ‘rejuvenation of the nation’, a goal of a prosperous country.

China’s regional posture is based on a mixed strategic approach. This new approach is two-pronged; one is based on the tougher discourse and means, and the other is based on softer aspects. First, the aspect is tougher and more assertive based on the uncompromising policy towards its core interests and proactively pursuing and defending those interests. Second, the aspect is based on cooperation and collaboration based on the flexible responses on the policy areas that are less than the core interests and of relatively secondary importance (Boon 2017: 639-662). Interestingly, the definition of Chinese vital national interests is linked with its perception of the regional strategic environment, and policy to safeguard those interests is based on ground-tangible realities and the actions of the other states (Hameiri and Jones 2018: 573-593). China is dissatisfied with the US role in the region and beyond. Washington is perceived as exporting democracy and human rights targeting the Chinese system and pursuing the policy of hub-and-spoke alliance model aiming at harming opponents, especially China (Buchas 2016).

COVID-19 further exposed the governance issues at the existing international order. Challenges that the US has faced in managing the crisis have further fragmented the regional and international order. Some have gone to the length of describing the post-Pandemic world as a new world as the pandemic has presented a ‘reordering moment in the international order’ (Blackwill and Wright 2020). Pre-Pandemic and post-Pandemic rivalry, if not altogether changed the regional and international order, has damaged its architecture and has polarised the actors to the extent that new dis-

order is inevitable with latent repercussions and implications not only for the states' interests and status but also for the international system.

7. Rise of other regional actors: a case for multipolar moment

The end of the Cold War and Russia's growing influence in the region and the rise of other actors like Japan, India, Australia, and ASEAN as a regional structure have given rise to a multipolar moment in the region. Regional multipolarity is on the rise. Suisheng Zhao has predicted well in 1997 that the post-Cold War regional multipolar processes are likely to become more and more significant in international politics (Zhao 1997). In the regional context, Chinese initiatives like BRI, the New Security Concept (NSC), and its naval and military modernisation can be taken as empirical evidence for this. On the other hand, the US, a regional predominant military and political power, has not abandoned its designs of maintaining its regional preponderance. Its Asia Pivot policy under the Obama administration and Indo-Pacific strategy under the Trump administration can be considered as a gauge for the prospects.

The presence of multiple powers in the region has turned the regional order into a sort of game among different players struggling to sustain dominance primarily through different dimensions: geoeconomics, military, politics, and diplomacy, in which the blend of simultaneous cooperation and competition will decide the future geopolitical trajectory of the regional order (Medcalf 2019: 58-69). In the regional context, Chinese initiatives like BRI, the New Security Concept (NSC), and its naval and military modernisation can be taken as empirical evidence for this. On the other hand, the US, a regional predominant military and political power, has not abandoned its designs of maintaining its regional preponderance. Its Asia Pivot policy under the Obama administration and Indo-Pacific strategy under the Trump administration can be considered as a gauge for the prospects.

Principally, the quest for economic preponderance, particularly the need to meet energy demand, is taking the region towards geoeconomics. The rising powers, China, Australia, India, Japan, and other Southeast Asian states are competing to fulfil energy needs that have resultantly engaged them in a maritime competition. This rise of several states on the regional spectrum has challenged the idea of unipolarity or bipolarity in Pacific Region in favour of multipolarity. So, the regional order will not be determined by one or two powers but by many cooperating and, at the same time, competing powers.

Bilateral diplomacy and strategic partnerships practiced between the competing stakeholders have challenged regional peace and stability. Regional middle powers, Japan, India, and Australia are focussing on strengthening their ties to actively participate in regional affairs by allying willingly with the US primarily to counter the Chinese ever-expanding influence. Through the canvas on small powers, 'Mini-literalism' is often observed in the region, in which the small and middle power states make a collation based on shared values and interests to maintain stability in the region.

China's reclaiming maritime space and massive naval presence in the South China Sea has intensified its tensions with other states, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Although the Philippines is having maritime issues with China, it does not have significant capacity to compete with China or keep an eye on its activities. The Chinese have continued to press their claims vigorously, despite US-Philippine cooperation. Scarborough Shoal is in control of China with the presence of constant coast guards since 2012, and China has intensified activity elsewhere in the area of the Philippines' claims (Lohman 2020). This has led the Philippines to pursue more robust cooperation with the US.

Though Vietnam maintains strategic neutrality and has established a working relationship with China, the episodes of tension between the two in 2014 and 2019 harmed their cordiality. The issue was the deployment of Chinese naval coast guard escorts with its survey ship for drilling and exploration of oil and gas resources in what Vietnam claims is its Exclusive Economic Zone. Similarly, Chinese objections to Vietnam's drilling through Russian oil companies in the area have enhanced the tensions. Though the two have adopted a reconciliatory path afterwards through bilateral diplomacy and party-to-party contacts and Vietnam wants to maintain strategic neutrality, such incidents may cause problems between the two, especially in the event of a regional security crisis (Lohman 2020).

The crisis between Indonesia and China has deeper repercussions compared with those of the Philippines and Vietnam. In 2016, a Chinese flotilla of fishing boats accompanied by coast guard escorts operated in Indonesia's claimed waters. It resulted in a minor clash between the two navies. The Indonesian response was uncompromising and assertive. Indonesia deployed naval vessels and aircraft in the North Natuna Sea. Indonesia's response raised eyebrows in China as it took a different course of action compared with those of the Philippines and Vietnam. (Lohman 2020). Indonesia thus emerged as an important player in the geopolitical configuration of the region.

8. Conclusion

Chinese exponential economic growth, its formidable strength, and potential proactive initiatives like BRI and AIIB have won it repute and influence in the region and beyond. Recent US mini-lateral initiatives and partnerships can be considered as moves designed to sustain its influence and halt the expanding Chinese influence. In essence, the efforts are designed to ensure that the allies may not slip into the orbit of Chinese influence. QUAD and AUKUS are the new geopolitical strategies to repair the declining US position and a reaction to the ever-expanding Chinese military and political might and presence in the region and beyond. Where the US has engaged the allies at political and security levels, China, as the fastest-growing economy and a world trading power, has managed interdependence with many of its neighbours through the BRI. Though through its trade interdependence and diplomatic manoeuvring China has tackled competition with the US, regional

maritime issues and America's strategic emphasis on Indo-Pacific Region can still challenge the nature of the relationship of both countries with clear implications for the region and beyond (Friedberg 2018: 7-64).

Responses of the regional states to the emerging China and the US alignment of its interests with the regional states have ushered a new dynamism of politics between major and smaller powers in the region. Their reactions and the signing of the bilateral and multilateral agreements between states have confirmed the multiplicity of the actors in the region and have presented the prospects of many poles in the region with a relative degree of power and influence, the regional multipolar moment. Many have to share the pie of influence and interests in the Pacific Region.

Funding statement: No funding availed.

Conflict of interest statement: None.

Declaration: No AI and AI-assisted technologies are used for this paper.

Data availability statement. This study is qualitative hence no quantitative data is utilized. All the qualitative data that is utilized for this paper is properly cited, accessible and available.

Addresses:

Bilal Habib Qazi

School of International and Public Affairs
Jilin University
Changchun, 1300012 P. R. China

E-mails: qazibilalhabib21@mails.jlu.edu.cn, bhqazi@gmail.com

Irfan Hasnain Qaisrani

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Bahria University, Islamabad
Shangrilla Road, Sector E-8, Islamabad 44000, Pakistan

E-mail: iqaisrani.buic@bahria.edu.pk

Tel.: +92-333-6466366

Hussain Abbas

Department of International Relations,
The Islamia University of Bahawalpur
Bahawalpur, 63100 Pakistan

E-mail: hussain.abbas@iub.edu.pk

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