

The New Cold War in the Indo-Pacific: US-China Rivalry & the Race of Global Influence

Shruti Agarwal^{1*}, Harshika Pandla^{2*}, Mokshadaa Gupta^{3*}, Revanth Netha^{4*}, Vanshika Kakkar^{5*}

¹B.A. Political Science (Hons), Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, New Delhi- 110049 India

²BBA, S.S. Jain Subodh PG Mahila Mahavidyalaya, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur- 302004 India

³B.A. (Hons) French Language & Literature, Department of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi- 110007 India

⁴MRes International Relations, University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton- WV1 1LY United Kingdom

⁵B.A. Political Science (Hons), Gargi College, University of Delhi, New Delhi- 110049 India

Corresponding Author: Shruti Agarwal
Email ID: shrutiagarwal.2802@gmail.com
Contact No.: +91 9837461010

Abstract

This paper explores how maritime rivalry, coalition-building, and regional governance in the Indo-Pacific region are being reshaped due to ongoing competition between the United States and China. Instead of framing this as a simple replay of Cold War bloc politics, the study treats the region as an arena where states adjust their positions through overlapping alliances, minilateral arrangements, and strategic narratives rather than direct military confrontation. Empirically, the analysis follows three main strands: the indirect influence of the Russia-Ukraine war on the region's maritime strategy, the shift in India-China rivalry from land borders to sea lanes, and the formation of AUKUS and the Quad as key coalitions in regional security politics. Drawing on policy reports and academic studies, the paper uses interpretative discourse analysis to read how governments and experts deploy ideas of stability, rules and order to justify changing maritime postures and new forms of strategic cooperation.

Key Words

Maritime Cooperation, Hegemony, Balance of power, Strategic Cooperation, QUAD, AUKUS, Freedom of Navigation (FON).

Introduction

In the era of rapid globalisation, the Indo-Pacific region has become increasingly significant for maritime trade and countries have attempted to maintain their presence by conducting naval exercises. It has grown into an area of strategic rivalry between USA and China as both the countries seek to exert their influence in the region due to their own economic, diplomatic and military interests.

For the USA, the Indo-Pacific is crucial as a region where economic prosperity, maritime security and regional stability are closely interconnected. It provides America with opportunities to strengthen regional connectivity and build alliances and partnerships with countries including the ASEAN. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific strategy of the USA recognises the importance of building interpersonal and societal connections and has thus taken initiatives aimed at youth leadership. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework proposed by the United

States highlights the importance of multilateral cooperation and adopts an approach centred on integrated deterrence. In addition, it aims to strengthen ASEAN's centrality while supporting India's emerging regional leadership and reinforcing initiatives under the Quad (The White House, 2022).

On the other hand, the Indian Ocean region is vital for China as it fulfils its maritime ambitions and defends its sea lines of communication. Additionally, China also conducts military exercises in the region which provide it with the opportunity to operate near the regions of Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and Mozambique channel among various others. To secure maritime connectivity, China has financed the construction of ports in the region, such as the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka (Balasubramaniam, 2023).

Although both the countries seek to expand their regional influence, they pursue different strategic approaches. The United States' approach to the region is centred on preserving it as a region that is "free, open, secure, and stable." A key objective of this strategy is to prevent any single power, particularly China, from dominating the region while protecting the interests of the US and its allies and partners. China, in contrast, seeks to strengthen its position by combining economic engagement with growing strategic presence and establishing itself as the region's leading power. At the same time, China's regional ambitions are closely linked to its domestic priorities which include protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity, sustaining economic development, and maintaining a regime security (Lin et al., 2023).

The perspective of regional countries helps us to determine whose influence and presence is greater in the region. For these countries, the US has a stronger diplomatic and military presence while China has developed more economic influence in the region. The race between the two countries mainly focuses on influencing more countries, developing partnerships, ports, securing maritime trade and protecting sea lanes of communication (Lin et al., 2023). It is also important to note that both the US and China face challenges and in the changing global order, the role played by emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) will be crucial in determining regional dynamics. Both the countries should continue to advance in the technological sector as it will aid in their influence in the region (Hass et al., 2026).

Literature Review

Russia-Ukraine war and Indo-Pacific maritime strategy

Recent scholarship suggests that the Russia- Ukraine war has affected the Indo-Pacific less through direct military spillover and more by sharpening existing strategic anxieties (Rai & Singh, 2025; Rees, 2025). The conflict has reinforced the idea that major wars outside Asia can still reshape maritime planning, alliance behavior, and perceptions of vulnerability across the regional maritime order (Walker, 2023; Rees, 2025). In particular, the war has encouraged Washington to treat the Indo- Pacific and Europe as linked security theatres, rather than separate strategic arenas (Walker, 2023). This has increased attention to deterrence, forward presence, and cooperation with partners that can help sustain a favorable maritime balance (Walker, 2023; Rees, 2025).

Writers such as Rai and Singh argue that the war has strengthened concerns about the durability of the existing international order, especially where military force is used to alter borders (Rai & Singh, 2025). Rees adds that the conflict did not divert American attention away from Asia; instead, it accelerated the view that China remains the central long-term competitor and that maritime power is essential for maintaining deterrence (Rees, 2025). Taken together, this literature points to acceleration rather than rupture: the war intensified dynamics already underway in Indo-Pacific security politics (Rai & Singh, 2025; Rees, 2025).

India–China maritime competition

A separate but related body of work shows that India - China rivalry is no longer confined to land borders or the Himalayan frontier (Khan & Ali, 2023; Tran et al., 2023). More recent studies argue that the competition has moved into the naval competition domain, where ports, trade routes, and naval reach increasingly shape influence in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-pacific (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2024; Khan & Ali, 2023). China's port development, infrastructure diplomacy and Maritime Silk Road projects are often discussed as part of a wider effort to improve access, secure sea lanes and deepen strategic leverage (Khan & Ali, 2023; Tran et al., 2023). Hambantota and Gwadar are commonly used as examples of how commercial connectivity can also carry geopolitical significance (Tran et al., 2023).

India's response has combined naval modernization, expanded regional partnerships, and a stronger effort to present itself as a security provider rather than a formal alliance leader (Yadav, 2025; Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2024). Sources such as the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, Khan and Ali, Tran et al., and Yadav emphasize that India has tried to balance China's maritime reach without giving up strategic autonomy. This literature shows that India's approach is neither purely competitive nor fully aligned with the West; rather, it is shaped by multi-alignment, selective cooperation and a desire to avoid rigid bloc politics (Tran et al., 2023; Yadav, 2025). The result is a more layered form of rivalry in which economic ties, naval capability, and diplomatic flexibility all matter (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2024; Khan & Ali, 2023).

AUKUS, the QUAD, and maritime balancing

The literature on AUKUS and the Quad generally treats them as distinct but connected responses to China's growing maritime power (Crepin, 2022; HCSS, 2022). The Quad is usually described as a flexible platform for coordination, capacity-building, naval exercises, and support for a rules-based maritime framework (Greene & Rolls, 2023; TRT World Research Centre, 2022). AUKUS, by contrast, is presented as a more hard-power-focused arrangement built around advanced military technologies, submarines, cyber capabilities, and undersea warfare (Greene & Rolls, 2023; Warren, 2025). Together, they represent different levels of balancing: one emphasizes cooperation and norm-setting, while the other stresses deterrence and capability enhancement (Crepin, 2022; Warren, 2025).

Crepin, HCSS, Greene and Rolls, Warren, TRT World Research Centre, and Medcalf all suggest that these minilateral arrangements are shaped by concern over China's expanding influence, even when China is not named directly as the target (Crepin, 2022; HCSS, 2022; Medcalf, 2026; TRT World Research Centre, 2022). Their stated language tends to focus on international law, regional stability, freedom of navigation, and a norm-based regional order (Medcalf, 2026; TRT World Research Centre, 2022). This framing matters because it allows the groupings to present themselves as defensive and stabilizing rather than openly containment-oriented (Greene & Rolls, 2023; Warren, 2025). At the same time, the overlap between the Quad and AUKUS raises questions about fragmentation, strategic pressure on

smaller states, and the long-term coherence of Indo-Pacific security architecture (HCSS, 2022; Medcalf, 2026).

Research Gap

Focus on Indo-Pacific maritime domain from 2022-25 after the start of Russia-Ukraine war, when global naval deployments, supply chain security and alliance behaviour sharpened.

1. Impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on Indo-Pacific maritime security (2022-2025) was ignored / under-explored. Focus will be on How US, NATO/its allies and China recalibrate naval positions, defence partnerships and supply chains in the Indo-Pacific.
2. Not much attention is given to Indo-China maritime rivalry. Much of the existing research views Indo-China rivalry as mainly land border while ignoring / confining Indo-China maritime rivalry as part of the broader Indo-Pacific maritime rivalry.
3. Analysis of QUAD & AUKUS as maritime counter-balancing coalitions against China. As existing research focuses separately on both groupings, there is a need to analyse both groupings together for practical implementation of maritime deterrence and power-projection in response to Chinese maritime ambitions.

Research Methodology

Interpretive Discourse Analysis Approach

This study uses a qualitative research method and interpretive discourse analysis to analyse the development of US & China maritime rivalry within the larger Indo-Pacific competition.

This paper aims to examine how perceptions of threat, and strategic intentions are constructed and sustained within official, academic, and policy discussions. This approach is especially useful for analysing the maritime rivalry of India and China in the Indo-Pacific region, where competing narratives such as hegemonic transition, security dilemma, and offshore balancing shape the way these developments are understood and interpreted.

Data Collection

This research is guided by secondary sources including peer reviewed journal articles, policy reports, strategic studies publications, and academic books on the Indo-Pacific, maritime security, and the implications of the Russia-Ukraine War. Key texts include works by Rai and Singh (2025), Walker (2023), Rees (2025), Khan and Ali (2023), Tran et al. (2023), Yadav (2025), Crepin (2022), Greene and Rolls (2023) and other relevant scholars. The literature was selected for its pertinence to three interrelated themes that are at the core of this study: (1) the impact of the Russia–Ukraine (2) The course of the India-China maritime contest and its consequences for regional stability, (3) the development of and increasing significance of regional security arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS in influencing the balance of power in the region. The most recent publications after 2022 were prioritised so as to ensure that the analysis reflects current geopolitical developments and the evolving security environment.

This research project adopts an analytical framework to examine evolving security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific post-Russia-Ukraine War. This research collates and compares academic literature, policy papers and strategic studies to gauge the impact of the conflict on regional security perceptions, maritime competition, defence cooperation and strategic alignments. In particular, the paper discusses the responses of major states like India, China, the United States, Japan and Australia and the increasing importance of security alliances such as QUAD and AUKUS. This paper studies the wider geopolitical ramifications of the Russia–Ukraine War for the Indo-Pacific.

Analysis And Findings

The Russia–Ukraine War and the Indirect Reshaping of US–China Maritime Postures in the Indo-Pacific

This study finds that the Russia-Ukraine War acted more as a catalyst rather than a direct cause for the growing strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. It demonstrated how large scale military action, economic sanctions and disruptions to global trade could reshape the security

priorities far beyond the imagination. Since this wider region is the centre of global maritime trade, developments of the Russia- Ukraine war largely influenced the policies and behaviour of countries across the region.

The conflict strengthened Washington's view that revisionist powers could threaten the existing international order through the use of military force, therefore, the US fast-tracked existing projects. It accelerated the implementation of already existing initiatives such as strengthening the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework and expanding alliances with partners through diplomatic measures such as the QUAD and AUKUS. On the other hand, China interpreted the Russia- Ukraine war as an opportunity to reassess its own military and maritime strategy. Chinese strategists focused on operational lessons concerning logistics, sanctions resistance, information warfare, and rapid military decision-making. The conflict appears to have reinforced China's assessment that maritime capabilities are important for safeguarding its long- term security interests. Consequently, Beijing continued to increase the investments in aircraft carriers, amphibious capabilities, anti-submarine warfare, and long-range naval deployments. These actions demonstrated preparation not only for regional dominance but also for potential contingencies involving Taiwan and the South China Sea.

India–China maritime rivalry in the wider Indo-Pacific

Maritime dimension has become a defining feature of India- China rivalry over the Indo-Pacific region, extending their long- standing competition beyond the land dispute issues. Rather than responding to individual infrastructure projects, India's security concerns stem from the continuous expansion of China's regional connectivity network through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), development of Gwadar Port and the maritime and territorial connectivity projects in several nations under the Belt and Road Initiative. These initiatives were viewed by India as not just economic or developmental in nature but as efforts to expand and strengthen Beijing's long- term presence across the wider Indian Ocean. This led India to gradually shift its maritime strategy and reciprocate to these moves by strengthening a naval presence in critical sea lanes including the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and surrounding waters. Moreover, India increasingly cooperates with US, Japan and other Quad members to address these concerns, however, at the same time India has always avoided entering a formal anti-China alliance. This approach highlights India's continued commitment

to follow a flexible, balanced and independent foreign policy based on multi-alignment. The later emergence of AUKUS, demonstrates the intensifying militarisation and strategic alignment among like-minded countries to counter the regional security challenges. However, despite the growing naval expansion and competition, both India and China avoid direct military confrontation.

AUKUS and the QUAD as maritime counter-balancing coalitions

The formations and operation of these coalitions is the quintessential example of Balance of Power in international politics. This finding underscores the evolution of both groupings and highlights how their development is closely linked to growing concerns regarding China's growing regional influence and suspicious activeness in the Indo-Pacific, a zone of immense geopolitical and economic importance on the globe. Neither group explicitly names China as its target, but the timing of their development, their strategic priorities and their focus on maritime issues suggest that both are mechanisms to counterbalance China's increasing power in the area.

The evolving security environment in the Indian Ocean-Pacific region is mirrored in the evolution of the Quad from an informal consultative framework to a more formalised strategic alliance. The Quad members, Australia, India, Japan and the United States, have united to promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific" as China has upgraded its naval capabilities and taken increasingly aggressive actions in contested maritime spaces, such as the South China Sea. The focus on freedom of navigation, respect for international legal norms and protection of maritime trade routes can be viewed as a reaction to China's increasing capacity to influence the governance of regional seas. The Quad has moved beyond talk to tangible security cooperation, including joint naval exercises like Malabar and greater cooperation on maritime surveillance.

AUKUS came with a more overt military context. Whereas the Quad has a broad diplomatic and regional agenda, AUKUS is primarily about boosting military capability, particularly in the area of undersea warfare and advanced defence technologies. Providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines will substantially increase the allied naval presence in the Indo-Pacific and improve long-range deterrence capabilities. The push into artificial intelligence,

cyber technologies, quantum computing and underwater systems points to a bid to keep technological dominance over China's fast military modernisation.

There is, however, one important limitation in the literature. Many Indo-Pacific states want to preserve their economic relations with China and are reluctant to participate in initiatives perceived as containment strategies. Consequently, the two sides frame their objectives in terms of defending and upholding the rules-based order, to maintain regional stability and ensure freedom of navigation, rather than directly challenging China. These observations suggest that coalitions are trying to indirectly balance China, attempting to limit China's influence without provoking a direct confrontation.

Empirical Evidences

1. 'No Limits' Partnership between China and Russia

After the West put sanctions on them the trade between the two countries reached a high of 245 billion US dollars in 2024. This is because China became Russia's trade partner and the main buyer of Russian energy. China benefited from buying oil at a lower price, which helped China save around 18.3 billion dollars from April 2022 to February 2026. China got a deal on Russian oil. [<https://merics.org/en/china-russia-dashboard-facts-and-figures-special-relationship>]

2. U.S. Activity & Readiness in the Indo-Pacific Region during the Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine war did not slow down the United States from boosting its presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. And the Philippines agreed to military cooperation through the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The EDCA sites grew from 5 in 2014 to 9 by April 2023. These sites now include three ones in northern Luzon facing Taiwan and one in Palawan. This shows the U.S. is taking planning and deterrence more seriously. The U.S. put money into these military sites. From 2014 to 2023 it invested 56.8 million U.S. Dollars in the five EDCA sites. It also announced a 128 million U.S. Dollars for the newer sites. The U.S. and the Philippines also did joint military activities. In 2018 they did 261 activities. By 2023 that number was over 500. This shows Washington is getting more involved in security, in the

Indo-Pacific even as it supports Ukraine. [<https://philippinerevolution.nu/2024/11/04/primer-a-decade-of-edca-us-military-bases-and-its-expanding-war-games-in-the-philippines/>]

Discussion

The Russia–Ukraine war has had important maritime consequences for the Indo-Pacific, not because it created an entirely new rivalry, but because it intensified strategic trends that were already present. Its main impact has been to deepen existing balancing patterns and make them more visible across the region. One of the most noticeable effects has been the renewed importance of the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. The war reinforced Washington’s understanding that developments in Europe and the Indo-Pacific are linked, which gave greater significance to cooperation with partners such as the Quad and AUKUS. At the same time, this also shows that the Indo-Pacific is no longer shaped only by the competition between the US and China. Regional actors such as Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asian states also influence how far the region moves toward bloc politics or remains a more flexible strategic space. Their preference for neutrality and hedging indicates that the regional order is still being shaped rather than fully settled. China’s response has been more measured and strategic. Rather than reading the war as a warning against the use of force, Beijing appears to have treated it as a source of lessons about logistics, sanctions resistance, and the role of maritime strength in sustaining military resilience. In that sense, the expansion of aircraft carriers and anti-submarine capabilities reflects more than routine modernization. It suggests that China is preparing for long-term strategic competition, especially in relation to Taiwan, while also signaling that sea power remains central to its wider security thinking. At the same time, regional states such as Indonesia and Vietnam are not standing still. Their efforts to build maritime capacity suggest that China’s rise is encouraging not only US-led balancing, but also quieter forms of self strengthening among nearby states. Taken together, these responses point to a more layered and multi-actor balancing environment than older great power rivalry models usually capture.

The Indo-China maritime rivalry has also moved well beyond a simple territorial dispute. It is now shaped by military capability, economic influence, and regional alignment. India’s concern about Chinese infrastructure projects is not only about physical connectivity, but about the strategic leverage such projects may create in the Indian Ocean. India’s response, however, is

not a straightforward alignment with the West. Instead, it combines naval modernization, closer cooperation with Quad members, and the preservation of strategic autonomy. This matters because it shows that balancing in the Indo-Pacific is not a binary choice. India is not simply choosing between independence and partnership; it is trying to preserve both at the same time. Smaller states such as Maldives and Sri Lanka also remain relevant because their location gives them influence over sea routes and regional positioning, which makes them part of the wider maritime balance. This shows that middle and smaller powers are not merely reacting to great power competition but are also helping shape the structure of Indo-Pacific maritime order.

AUKUS and the Quad should therefore be understood as different forms of counterbalancing rather than direct instruments of confrontation. The Quad serves as a flexible platform for maritime coordination, freedom of navigation, and rules-based cooperation, while AUKUS is more clearly oriented toward military deterrence and advanced capability development. Their coexistence indicates that the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific is becoming more complex, with one coalition focusing on political alignment and the other stressing the importance of hard-power displays. This represents a departure from traditional alliance-focused containment strategies. Simultaneously, their impact is constrained by the reality that numerous regional countries remain economically reliant on China, and as a result, are hesitant to engage in a clear containment strategy. As a result, the future of the region is likely to be shaped less by direct confrontation and more by indirect competition, hedging, and selective cooperation. This layered and indirect form of balancing is likely to remain a defining feature of Indo-Pacific security in the near term.

This study has some limitations. It is based on a relatively short period from 2020 to 2024 and relies on publicly available sources because classified information is not accessible. This means it is better suited to identifying broad strategic trends than to making precise long-term predictions. Even so, the analysis suggests that the Russia–Ukraine war has influenced maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific by intensifying rivalry, sharpening balancing strategies, and increasing the role of regional actors beyond the major powers.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has indirectly influenced maritime rivalries in the Indo-Pacific by intensifying existing tensions in the competition between the US and China, as well as the rivalry between India and China, and the efforts to forge alliances. The conflict has solidified the US's commitment to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and has strengthened partnerships through initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS. In reaction, China has improved its naval capabilities and expanded its maritime presence. The competition between India and China has transitioned from land to maritime frontiers. Both nations are enhancing their naval capabilities, seeking to increase their economic power, and forming partnerships with other countries in the region to reach their objectives. India aims to balance its alliances with various nations while preserving its autonomy. The entire Indo-Pacific area is expected to remain a point of contention, with both leading powers and smaller states playing crucial roles. ASEAN and other regional actors hold considerable sway over events, including issues of stability, access, and strategic choices. Rivalries among nations are anticipated to persist, although in a more indirect manner. Rather than engaging in direct confrontations, nations will rely on deterrence, collaboration, and power balancing. Through this approach, countries will aim to avoid direct combat and instead achieve their objectives through various strategies. This may involve working together on certain matters while competing in others. The region will play a crucial role moving forward, and the dynamics among different nations will significantly shape future development.

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