

US-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION AND THE INEVITABLE THUCYDIDES TRAP

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Abstract: The ongoing competition and rivalry between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China is the defining issue of the 21st century in international relations. Both the great powers have been engaged in a strategic competition often referred to by some scholars as the New Cold War. The US wants to maintain its status quo with it as the world's sole superpower. However, China's rise has challenged the United States' hegemony as well as its 'New World Order', and is in favor of a multi-polar world order where it could have also the same level of influence. The competition between the two powers encompasses various domains from trade and technology to military and influence. When a rising power challenges the hegemony of an existing power the dilemma it creates is known as Thucydides' Trap. The Indo-Pacific region is the center of competition between both the great powers. Key issues between both the countries in the Indo-Pacific region include the South China Sea Disputes, the Taiwan Issue, and China's growing assertiveness. The intense competition between both the great powers and various maritime and territorial disputes between China and several other US allies such as Taiwan can potentially lead to a military conflict between the US and China. This qualitative research focuses on all those factors that could potentially lead to a military conflict between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region under the theoretical framework of Thucydides' Trap. An instance of Germany and Britain is used to prove that the current rivalry between the US and China has the potential to lead to a military conflict between them.

Keywords: US-China; Strategic competition, South China Sea; Possible war; Indo-Pacific; Thucydides' Trap

1 INTRODUCTION

The ongoing competition and rivalry between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China is the defining issue of the 21st century in international relations. The rise of China challenges the global hegemony of the USA would lead to all-out war or conflict between the two giants. China's rapid economic military power building and its struggle for global reach whereas, USA's 'gunboat diplomacy' specifically in the South China Sea is translated into Thucydides Trap. Historically, relations between both countries were not good due to the Cold War polarization of global politics and China's strategic alliance with the USSR. The events that mainly exacerbated US-China rivalry; were the communist revolution in China in 1949, the Sino-Soviet nexus, the US policy of containment of Communism, US intervention in the Korean and Vietnam War, and finally its refusal to recognize the People's Republic of China in favor of the Republic of China based in Taiwan. Relations between both countries started improving after US President Nixon visited China in 1972. On 1 January 1979, the US formally established diplomatic relations with the PRC by recognizing it as the sole legitimate government of China.

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "China is a Sleeping Giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes up, she will shake the world". Today, China's rise has shaken the whole world, particularly the United States. Since the 1980s, China has been one of the fastest-growing powers in terms of military, economic, and technological in the world. Today China is the second largest economy after the US and is now a regional power. Its rise has challenged US hegemony and its New World Order. It is second to Russia that poses an existential threat to the United States, its position as the global policeman and guardian of the post-Cold War international order. The United States of America sees China as its strategic rival and considers it a great threat to its interests in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. When a rising power challenges the hegemony of the existing superpower, the dilemma it creates is known as the Thucydides Trap as explained by Greek historian Thucydides. This rivalry between both powers has raised concerns about the possibility of a disastrous military conflict, which could have profound geopolitical repercussions.

Since the normalization of relations in the 1970s, the relationship between both States has been marked by several issues such as the political status of Taiwan, China's claim over the South China Sea, etc. Both countries have been engaged in a new competition (often named by some scholars as the New Cold War) to dominate the Indo-Pacific region. The competition between the two powers encompasses various domains from trade and technology to military and influence. The US wants to maintain its status quo with it as the world's sole superpower. However, China's rise has challenged its hegemony and is in favor of a multi-polar world order where it could have also the same level of influence. The center of competition between both countries is the Indo-Pacific region, a place where the emerging power and increasing influence of China is an area of concern for the US.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw significant shifts in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific Ocean has a great deal of value particularly the South China Sea because of its strategic position, political movement, economic volatility, and historical culture. The Indo-Pacific region has not only great importance for The United States of America and China. But it has also importance for other regional powers like Japan, India, and Australia as well as other countries around the South China Sea. The Indo-Pacific region is a major driver of the world economy. It is home to numerous strategic choke points like the Strait of Malacca as most of the key maritime routes pass through this region. Furthermore, approximately two-thirds of the global trade passes through this region which makes it a global economic center. Because of its prominence, it has become an area of competition between the US and China. Strategic competition among major powers is increasing day by day in the region with China as a major threat to the US hegemony in the region. Both countries want their hegemony in the Indo-Pacific Region because those who control the region will gain the status of superpower shortly. To counter China and balance power in the region, the US is making alliances with the major powers of the region such as Japan, India, Australia e.g., QUAD AUKUS, and other South Asian countries. It has strengthened ties with China's traditional rivals India and Japan. The US National Security Strategy document of 2017 has labeled China as a strategic competitor. Since then, trade wars, technological wars, and strategic competition between both powers have escalated.

Recently, tensions between both countries have escalated in the region over the disputed territories of the South China Sea and the political status of Taiwan as China is claiming over both. The United States of America has great influence and interest in the Indo-Pacific region and it can do anything to preserve its hegemony and achieve its interest in the region. If both the great powers have to go to war with each other to achieve their objectives and national interests, they will not hesitate. This research paper aims to analyze the current US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region and the possibility of a military conflict between them.

Furthermore, there is a huge stock of literature on the problem some works are very sophisticated and undoubtedly very credible such as "*Destined for War*" Graham Allison[1], argued that the impact of a rising China on the United States and the global order under American hegemony are leading these two nations toward an unavoidable violent clash, which neither one wants, because they risk falling into what the author calls "Thucydides Trap". Allison describes the Thucydides Trap as a dangerous dynamic that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power or challenge its hegemony. He argued in his book how the rise of China has threatened US hegemony generally in the world and particularly in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. He gave the example of 16 cases in his book in the past five hundred years in which an ascending power challenged an established power. In such background conditions, war is the most likely outcome (12/16cases) but an inevitable one (4/16 cases). He argued that China's disruptive rise creates conditions in which accidental, otherwise inconsequential events, could trigger a large-scale conflict. However, he certainly presents the South China Sea as a great point of tension between the US and China today[2].

In another prominent work: "*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*" John J. Mearsheimer argued that "the inherent structure of the international system and the relentless pursuit of power by states often lead to great power conflicts. When major powers like the United States and China are locked in a competitive struggle for dominance, smaller nations like Pakistan find themselves caught in the crossfire, facing the profound implications of such power struggles on their security and national interest"[3]. "John Mearsheimer is also among those who perceive China's rise as the most immediate threat to the US supremacy. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism predicts intense security competition between China and its rivals and the threat of war among these competing powers. He foresees China and the US becoming adversaries as China's power increases"[4]. The world's power is gradually shifting from west to east. China is involved in disputes in the East and South China Seas which can undermine the future of China in the region as well as in the world. Great powers have no reason to fight each other but their uncertainty about their survival forces them to seek power[3].

2 THEORETICAL MODEL

In this research "Thucydides's Trap" theory presented by Graham Allison an American political theorist who derived from Greek historian Thucydides has been used as a theoretical framework. According to Graham Allison, "Thucydides's Trap refers to the natural, inevitable discomobulation that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power". In this theory, Graham Allison postulates about the likelihood of war when a rising power challenges the status quo of an existing superpower. In this case, China as a rising power has challenged the United States' hegemony and superpower status. The United States, in turn, has taken several measures to contain China. The US wishes to avoid Chinese control in the region and is unwilling to hand over regional hegemony to China. This increases the likelihood of a major power conflict erupting between the two nations. It is difficult for both the countries to escape the Thucydides's Trap and war is more likely in the future because war is Inevitable in such situations. When a rising power challenges the hegemony of an existing superpower the dilemma it creates is known as Thucydides Trap as explained by Greek historian Thucydides. To prove Thucydides' trap between the USA and China the author has discussed sixteen cases in which a rising power possessed a great threat to the existing power. In these sixteenth cases, twelve ended in a military conflict. This was the same case when a rising Germany challenged the superpower status of Great Britain before World War I.

3 METHODOLOGY

Methodology is a crucial part of the whole research process. It is the specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select, collect, process, and analyze relevant data about a topic or a problem. This research study is mainly qualitative. As only qualitative data have been collected, we used the document analysis method for data collection because our work only relied on secondary data. A detailed and systematic review of research papers, reports, books, and newspapers related to US-China relations and strategic competition between both countries in the Indo-Pacific region, disputes in the region, and its foreign policies is conducted. A thematic analysis of the data has been used. For investigation of the problem some cases as instances were studied to drive in-depth and systemic investigation. Besides this, this research is non-experimental in design because it is a social science research and the nature of the problem.

4 DOWNWARD SPIRALS OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

The bilateral relationship between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China is the most complex comprising the features of conflict and cooperation. Relations between the two countries have not been good since the beginning. However, it became worse since the start of the twenty-first century "The United States has just entered the fourth phase of its relationship with China since the end of World War II. In phase one, Mao Zedong's decision to go to war with the United States in Korea in 1950 produced a long period of antagonistic interaction. Phase two saw Richard M. Nixon and Henry Kissinger open up the relationship to better meet the global Soviet threat and, they hoped, end the Vietnam War on honorable terms. In phase three, Washington sought to bring Beijing ever more into the international system, hoping it would eventually become a "responsible stakeholder" and accede to U.S.-fashioned rules of domestic and international order. Now in Phase Four, the United States is beginning to fully digest the aggressive elements of Chinese power projection and take initial actions to deal with it"[5].

During the Cold War era both the US and China relations had been influenced by numerous international developments. In the initial phase of the Cold War, the relationship between the US and China had been characterized by antagonism and confrontation. The United States of America has tried to destabilize the newborn communist government of Mao Zedong.

The Korean War (1950-53) and the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954 and 1958 further deteriorated the relationship between the US and China. It increased the bilateral hostilities between the US and China and brought both countries into a direct military confrontation, particularly in the Korean War. The Sino-US armies fought face-to-face in the Korean War. Besides this, to stop the spread of Communism, the US entered into two crucial defense treaties in Asia namely CENTO (1954) and SEATO (1955). "From 1953 to 1960, Sino-US relations remained strained on the issue of China's UN membership, trade imbalance and repatriation of the US citizens stranded in China since the Korean War"[6].

Sino-US relations remained hostile during the period of Jhon. F Kennedy. From 1960-70, Sino-U.S. relations have been characterized by several issues including the Vietnam War, Cuban Missile Crises, Sino-Indian War, and China's Nuclear Tests. After China's nuclear tests, both countries started talks to ease tensions between themselves and not to use nuclear bombs against each other. This was the time when the Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated over border and ideological issues.

The relationship between the US and China started improving in the Cold War era for the first time in the 1970s when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made a secret trip to China. After this visit, the People's Republic of China secured a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. Later in 1972, President Nixon to China changed the 22-year-old US foreign policy of the containment of China. "Richard Nixon as a presidential candidate in his famous Foreign Affairs article published in October 1967 stated that, 'we simply cannot afford to leave China outside the family of nations'"[7].

In 1973, formal diplomatic relations were established between the US and China. "The ping-pong diplomacy finally melted the thaw. Mao threw the debate onto the public to ask whether China should invite an American team for a visit. Finding public support, Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, reiterated China's willingness to receive a special envoy from the US via Pakistan. The US reduced military operations in Korea and agreed to halt bombing in Vietnam as a goodwill gesture. In Henry Kissinger's secret mission facilitated by Pakistan in 1970, a broad agenda was developed to reflect on Sino-U.S. pragmatic issues. Kissinger's announcement of a visit to China on July 15, 1971, amazed the international community, and it allowed China to escape international isolation"[6]. United States President Jimmy Carter granted full diplomatic and de-jure recognition to China and adopted the One China Policy. Jimmy Carter and his counterpart: the former President Deng developed a partnership that helped stabilize US-China relations from 1976-89.

In the post-Cold War era, the United States of America faced a crucial strategic question of whether to pursue a policy of engagement with the rising China or to adopt a containment strategy to counter China's growing economic and military power. The post-Cold War era reflects the unique dynamics of Sino-US relations. It marked significant developments in global politics including the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the United States as the only superpower, and the establishment of the New World Order.

The post-Cold War relations between the United States and China have been characterized by limited cooperation and extreme rivalry as China's rise poses a threat to the US hegemony in the world. "The most prominent characteristics of post-Cold War US-China relations, despite summitry and periodic improvement in relations, is persistent animosity and friction and constant threats to continued cooperation. Despite recent US-China summitry and greater cooperation, the relationship remains turbulent and subject to recurring conflict, with implications for regional peace and stability"[8].

Relations between the US and China during Clinton's presidency (1992-2000) were characterized by the US strategic engagement with China, driven by the belief that it would promote US interests. President Clinton's policy of

comprehensive engagement with China aimed at the gradual transformation of China into a democratic state and integrating China into the New Liberal World Order. “Despite the various divergences between the US and China, due to the large gap in power positions, status quo perceptions, and China’s effort to participate in the US-led liberal economic system, the US government adopted an engaging China policy during Clinton’s two terms”[9]. However, several issues strained relations between the US and China. These issues included; the rise of China, the Tiananmen Square Crises, and the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1996, when China conducted military exercises in response to the Taiwanese leader's visit to the US.

Unlike Clinton’s administration, the Bush administration (2001-2009) viewed China as a Strategic Competitor before the September 11 attacks. “In an interview with CNN in August 1999, the then-governor of Texas George Bush criticized Clinton’s constructive strategic partnership with China and argued that such perception of China was a major strategic miscalculation. Three months later, George Bush delivered a speech in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library to elaborate his foreign policy vision of “American internationalism”, emphasizing that China was a strategic competitor rather than a partner. To Bush’s perception of China, the election program modified its vision of US-China relations, considering China the first challenger in Asia”[9]. However, the September 11 attacks dramatically changed the Bush administration’s foreign policy towards China, seeking major power cooperation (including China) against the global ‘war on terrorism’. Furthermore, during the Bush administration, both countries held high-level communications by establishing strategic dialogue mechanisms in 2005 and strategic economic dialogue in 2006 with frequent meetings to address bilateral, regional, and global issues.

The first three years of Barack Obama’s administration were cooperative between the United States and China. Besides the global financial crises, China witnessed immense economic growth ultimately overtaking Japan as the second-largest economy after the United States. Due to Chinese economic growth, the US-China power gap rapidly narrowed. However, the Obama administration viewed China as a status quo power and wanted to build more constructive relations with it. China’s economic growth did not stop in the upcoming years raising concerns for the United States as the US-China power gap further narrowed.

In 2014, China saw the emergence of a new leader President Xi which has dramatically transformed China’s foreign policy challenging the United States’ hegemony and superpower status. Under the leadership of President Xi, China has become more ambitious, authoritative, and aggressive. Since the rise of President Xi, rivalry and strategic competition between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China has immensely increased. Instability arose in the US-China relations due to several issues including China's rise, first as a regional and now global power, ideological differences, disputes in the South China Sea, the Taiwan issue, and economic, political, and strategic interests.

China’s emergence as a major power in economic, military, and political dimensions in the twenty-first century has turned the face of US-China relations. Currently, both the United States and China are the greatest competitors and strategic rivals in the world. Today US-China relations resemble some dimensions of the Cold War era. Due to this, some scholars called the US-China rivalry and competition a New Cold War. China’s rise has challenged the superpower status of the US and its new world order. The United States of America sees China as a major competitor and threat to its hegemony and new world order. “In December 2017, the Trump administration unveiled its National Security Strategy report, which proposed that the United States is entering a new era of major power competition. The report labeled China as a ‘revisionist power’ and ‘strategic competitor’ that wants ‘to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests.’ In addition, the Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy issued by the US Department of Defense stressed that the ‘central challenge’ to the Pentagon was how to tackle ‘the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition’ with China and other rival states”[10]. “The Biden administration’s National Security Strategy recognizes China as the only state with the intent to reshape the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. The administration takes seriously China’s efforts to surpass the United States in technology, increase the world’s dependence on China’s supply chains, ramp up regional military operations, and align more closely with Iran, North Korea, and Russia.”[11].

5 KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE NEW GREAT GAME

“Great-power competition is back. With the post-Cold War unipolar moment over, the United States and China now jostle over trade and technology, compete in a controversial and nuclear arms race, and seek to counter the other in various hot spots”[12]. The current rivalry and strategic competition between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China is complex and multifaceted. It encompasses economic rivalry or trade war, technological competition, geopolitical rivalry, and military rivalry, which shapes the relationship between both global powers. These dimensions of rivalry are associated with the race for global hegemony and domination.

5.1 The Great Economic Rivalry

The Economic Rivalry or Trade War between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China formally began in July 2018 under the Trump administration when the United States of America imposed trade tariffs on Chinese goods. Since then, the US and China have been engaged in a trade war imposing trade tariffs and economic sanctions on each other. The United States of America is facing an economic rival in the shape of China. China’s immense economic growth is a major concern for the United States of America. The United States of America and the European Union employ trade policies, tariffs, and negotiations to counterbalance China’s economic influence, driven by concerns over

unfair trade practices, market access, and intellectual property rights. “The vision of its absolute dominance in the global economy in the US has come into conflict with the growing imbalance in bilateral trade with China, increasing competitiveness of high-tech companies based in the PRC, and an increase in China’s investments exports. The US officials state that China is pursuing unfair trade policies, exploiting the benefits of trade liberalization and WTO membership, while at the same time keeping its domestic market safeguarded against foreign competition by providing subsidies and facilitating export through currency devaluation. The US accuses China of stealing scientific and technical knowledge and technologies from American companies, violating intellectual property rights, and neglecting environmental protection requirements”[13].

5.2 The Great Technological Rivalry

The technological rivalry between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China has further deepened the ongoing competition between both countries. China’s advancing technological prowess is transforming the global technological and economic landscape. Beijing’s goals extend beyond merely adopting innovative technologies; it also aims to establish itself as a leader in setting international technology standards. This dynamic sets the stage for a prolonged period of economic and technological rivalry between the United States and China, as they compete for influence and dominance in the global arena. “The technology war is much more serious than the trade/economic war because whoever wins the technology war will probably also win the military wars and all the other wars. The US and China are now the dominant players in the world’s big tech sectors and these big tech sectors are the industries of the future. The Chinese tech sector has rapidly developed domestically to serve the Chinese in China and to become a competitor in the world market. At the same time, China remains highly dependent on technologies from the United States and other countries”[14]. The future of warfare will be shaped by technological advancements, with nations engaging in intense competition to develop game-changing military capabilities. The US and China are locked in a race for economic and technological dominance in the long term.

5.3 The Great Geopolitical Rivalry

The United States of America and the People’s Republic of China are great geopolitical rivals of the twenty-first century. The ongoing geopolitical competition between the United States and China is transforming the global economy, global power relations, and governance. “The complex interaction between the US and China, which has developed into a real confrontation, greatly affects global politics and economics, significantly influencing the geopolitical situation. The political behavior of most countries, delicate geopolitical balance, and the solution to global problems are now directly dependent on changes in US-China relations”[15]. China’s rise at the geopolitical level is a major concern for the United States. “At the opening session of the 19th National Congress of China in October 2017, President Xi declared that China would become a ‘socialist modern powerful country’ by the mid-21st century. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has vowed to make America great again and reaffirmed its resolve to maintain America’s global leadership. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo defined the mission as ‘rallying the noble nations of the world to build a new liberal order.’”[10]. China is attempting to better serve its interests by reshaping the international system’s institutions and rules through its expanding political and economic power. It has raised concerns for the United States of America. The United States of America is trying to counter China’s growing geopolitical influence through several strategies.

5.4 The Great Military Rivalry

Besides the great economic, technological, and geopolitical rivalry, the US and China are great military rivals as well. However, the great military rivalry between the US and China is limited to the Indo-Pacific region, particularly to the South China Sea. “Rising powers always concentrate on building up their abilities and powers. They build up their military capability to increase their influence. China is consistently enhancing its power and influence in the world. It is enhancing its military capability with time. In 2017, China increased seven percent of its military spending and secured the position of second-largest global military expenditure after the US. China wants to extend its military influence in the South China Sea (SCS) and strengthen its influence in the Spratly Islands”[16]. China’s rapid militarization in the Indo-Pacific region has positioned it as a dominant force, boasting an impressive arsenal of weapons, including newly commissioned aircraft carriers, enhanced airpower, and a significant expansion of military infrastructure in the South China Sea (SCS). The People’s Republic of China is modernizing its People’s Liberation Army (PLA) which has raised concerns for the United States. “China’s ongoing military modernization efforts, aimed at countering American intervention in any conflict related to Taiwan or disputes in the South China Sea, have prompted the US national security community to debate the military strategy required. These discussions have focused on ways to deter aggressive Chinese behavior and, if necessary, to prevail in a conventional armed conflict”[17]. China is the largest naval power in the world comprising several aircraft carriers, as well as advanced surface combatants, precision-guided munitions, and a fleet of stealth fighter jets and long-range bombers, which pose a significant concern for the United States. China’s increasing aggressiveness in the region prompted the United States to take action. The US has increased its military presence in the region to show its presence and influence, hoping to counterbalance China’s power and maintain stability in the region.

6 INDO-PACIFIC: EPICENTER OF US-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION

The Indo-Pacific (IP) region has become the center of strategic and geopolitical competition between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. There has been constant competition for primacy in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the South China Sea between rising China and the predominant player the United States. Prominent scholars and analysts see the Indo-Pacific region particularly the South China Sea (SCS) as a tipping point for a military conflict between the US and China, as intense power competition grows day by day. China's rise has threatened the sovereignty of other Indo-Pacific countries and challenged the United States' interests in the region. Both the US and China seek to increase and exercise their respective influence and power in the Indo-Pacific region. "In the 21st century, the Indo-Pacific region developed as a center of power politics given its geopolitical and geostrategic importance. It remains a hub because of its maritime connectivity between the Pacific and Indian regions Meadows"[18].

The Indo-Pacific region has great significance for both the United States and China. Both countries want their maximum influence in the IP region. "Hillary Clinton in her article published in November 2011 highlighted the importance of the Indo-Pacific, calling it the key driver of global politics and the next arena of the US' interest and investment. The article highlighted the new change in the US strategic thinking towards the Pacific. The stretch of water from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific runs through the busiest and most vibrant energy and trade corridors. Unlike the Pacific, the Indian Ocean is home to four of six maritime chokepoints, the Mozambique Channel, the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca. The US in its effort to ensure its sovereignty in the South China Sea and to curtail the expansion of China has joined hands with nations like Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea. For the US, the main objective of such a strategy is to bolster strategic and economic partnership to limit China's flexing."[19].

The United States of America has adopted several strategies to contain China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region. The US has made strategic alliances i.e. Quad and AUKUS with regional countries such as India, Japan, Australia, Philippines, South Korea, and many others to contain China in the region. "The actions taken by the United States have dragged other regional actors such as Australia, India, Japan. The four countries secretly formed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or "Quad". This security dialogue is an informal dialogue to coordinate security and military policies in favor of China covertly. The existence of the Quad defense dialogue indicates the efforts of the four-nation group to balance China's security in the South China Sea and control the Indo-Pacific region"[20]. The United States strategically considers the Indo-Pacific region as a key component of its global grand strategy, aiming to maintain its influence in this rapidly growing region. Besides joining hands with regional powers and increasing defense cooperation with them, the United States is maximizing its military presence in the region securing its interests, and acting directly in an emergency-like situation.

China's multi-billion dollar project known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also a major concern for the United States. The United States believes that China is expanding its sphere of influence through BRI. It has taken several measures to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative in the region. One of them is the India Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) which was recently announced in a G-20 Summit held in Delhi, India. "The first worthwhile counter initiative to BRI surfaced in 2019, i.e. Blue Dot Network – a multi-stakeholder initiative launched by the US, Australia, and Japan. This may be because of the miscalculation of the West, which considered BRI too ambitious a venture with a low probability of success. However, in 2019, serious efforts to counter BRI became evident. IMEC, therefore, is yet another endeavor in a series of such efforts"[21].

Chinese leaders are well aware of the United States' strategies against China. To counter the United States' influence and to promote its interest in the region, China has been pursuing alternative strategies. Such strategies aim to promote China's economic, political, and military influence in the Indo-Pacific region while countering the United States' presence and influence. In response to United States military aggression and defense cooperation with other South Asian countries against itself, China has adopted a confrontational stance to demonstrate its military prowess and deter potential US threats. Chinese leaders claim that removing obstacles will be necessary to achieve their nation's objectives. To do this, China intends to employ a three-pronged strategy in the near term: create a hostile foreign environment to concentrate domestic interests; lessen China's dependency on the US while increasing its reliance on other nations; and increase China's influence abroad. "In turn, the Chinese strategy is based on the desire to become the most considerable economic and military power, shifting the hegemony of the U.S. Based on the geopolitical competition between the two countries for political values and institutions that established the post-Cold War world order, China has seen American institutions and values as an obstacle to itself and a deterrent to growth. Therefore, to politically and economically counter U.S. global influence, China has actively begun to join regional and international institutions"[15].

To counter the US's influence in the region, China has also taken several steps such as modernizing its military by upgrading its capabilities including advanced weapon systems, and enhancing its naval and airpower. Furthermore, China is focusing on alternative international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), etc. to increase its influence. Besides this, China is building artificial islands in the South China Sea (SCS) to increase its area of influence. "China is building artificial islands on the Spratly archipelago and upgrading the military base on Woody Island. These developments have helped China to have a strong military presence in the SCS. The central purpose behind these constructions of artificial islands is to enhance its influence in the SCS. The Paracel and Spratly Islands both are strategically important places in the South China Sea. These islands are located in very strategic positions and half of the world trade passes through them. Woody Island and China's new seven artificial islands on the Spratly Islands have enhanced China's military and economic influence in

the region”[16]. It is strengthening its ties with North Korea and Russia against the United States in the region. Besides Russia and North Korea, it is also strengthening its relations with the South Asian nations.

7 UNAVIODABILITY OF THE TRAP

The evolving geo-political landscape in the Indo-Pacific region has become a focal point of international discourse, with the potential for heightened tensions between the United States and China casting a shadow over regional stability. As the US-China relationship continues to oscillate between Indo-Pacific cooperation and competition, the specter of a potential military confrontation looms large, raising critical questions about the implications of such a conflict for countries in the region.

John Mearsheimer in his book "Tragedy of Great Power Politics" asserts that big powers are compelled to maximize their security and power, which might result in an ongoing fight for supremacy. Because states may use force to defend or further their interests, this unrelenting quest for dominance has the potential to turn into conflict. Because there is no central authority, the international system is by its very nature chaotic and unstable, which feeds competition. The pursuit of power is a zero-sum game in which the gain of one power is the loss of another and great powers are primarily driven by self-interest rather than ideology or benevolence. "The main causes of war are located in the architecture of the international system. What matters most is the number of great powers and how much power each controls. A system can be either bipolar or multi-polar, and power can be distributed more or less evenly among the leading states. The power ratios among all the great powers affect the prospects for stability, but the key ratio is that between the two most formidable states in the system"[3].

Currently, the United States of America and the People's Republic of China stand in the same position, where one country's rise (China) is a zero-sum game for another (America). The international system is still anarchic in which states fear each other and maximize their power at the expense of each other. The fundamental nature of global politics hasn't changed in the 21st, with states remaining the primary actors and no higher authority to regulate their behavior. The collapse of the Soviet Union altered the global power balance, but it didn't transform the underlying anarchic system. As a result, great powers continue to operate in a competitive and self-interested manner, similar to past centuries, with no indication of a significant shift in behavior on the horizon. Policymakers, academics, and strategists are becoming more and more concerned about the prospect of a war between the United States and China, which was previously thought to be unlikely. A possible conflict has become more likely due to the two global superpowers' growing tensions, which are being fuelled by rivalry in geopolitics, conflicting interests, and ideological disagreements. An atmosphere of suspicion and animosity has been fostered by the issues surrounding the South China Sea, tensions with Taiwan, trade wars, and technology rivalries.

8 POTENTIAL FACTORS

The Strategic competition and rivalry between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China has raised the prospects of potential military conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. The potential factors that could lead to a military conflict in the Indo-Pacific region are discussed as under.

First, China's remarkable rise has triggered an intense rivalry with the United States, as China's growing economic and military prowess challenges America's long-held dominance. Having established itself as a regional power, China now aspires to attain superpower status, seeking to rival the US globally. Muhammad Saaida in his article 'The Rise of China as a Global Superpower and its Implications for International Relations' argued that China's rise has various implications including military conflict with the US. "the rise of China could lead to increased conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. China has territorial disputes with several countries in the region, including Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. These disputes could escalate into conflict if China's rise continues". Historically, whenever a rising power has challenged the hegemony of an existing dominant power, it has often led to conflict, and in some cases, war. This phenomenon is known as the "Thucydides Trap," named after the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, who observed that the rise of Athens and the fear it instilled in Sparta led to the Peloponnesian War.

Second, In the past year, the strategic rivalry between the US and China has escalated significantly. The US government has adopted a more assertive approach to China, with the 2017 National Security Strategy explicitly identifying China as a revisionist power seeking to alter the global order. The Trump administration's efforts to reduce the trade deficit led to the imposition of tariffs on billions of dollars, worth of Chinese goods, sparking a trade war that has continued to intensify. "Over the past year, the US-China strategic rivalry has intensified. The US government is taking a significantly harder line in its approach to China policy. In December 2017, the US National Security Strategy labeled China a revisionist power seeking to change the international order. The Trump administration, in an attempt to reduce the US trade deficit, subsequently imposed tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars of Chinese goods, leading to a spiraling trade war"[22]. The United States and China, the two major global powers, are engaged in an intense strategic rivalry, seeking to expand their influence worldwide, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Both nations are also competing technologically, particularly in areas like 5G, Artificial Intelligence, and Cyber Security, which may intensify the rivalry and increase the risk of conflict.

Third, The South China Sea (SCS) has emerged as a significant flashpoint in the escalating tensions between the United States and China. Graham Allison in his book "Destined for War", presented the South China Sea as the great point of tension between the US and China today. China's build-up and militarization of artificial islands and increasing naval

presence have heightened concerns, prompting the US to strengthen its military presence in the region. China has significantly expanded its naval and air capabilities, particularly in the South China Sea, by developing reclaimed islands and enhancing its land-based missile force. This strategic move aims to deny US forces access to the region, making it difficult for them to support Taiwan, South China Sea partners, and East China Sea allies. China is unilaterally altering the status quo in the South China Sea by constructing artificial islands, installing missile defense systems, and building airbases, thereby establishing a strategic foothold that poses increased risks to US military operations and freedom of navigation in this vital waterway. Through these actions, China is creating new geopolitical realities that challenge US influence and threaten the stability of the region. "In sum, as long as developments in the South China Sea are generally moving in China's favor, it appears unlikely to use military force. But if trends in the correlation of forces should shift against it, particularly at a moment of domestic political instability, China could initiate a limited military conflict, even against a larger, more powerful state like the US"[2].

China's claims on the one hand and its actions on the other hand have deepened tension in the region with the United States raising prospects of disastrous military conflict. "The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* released by the United States Department of Defense in 2019 affirmed "the enduring U.S. commitment to stability and prosperity in the region through the pursuit of preparedness, partnerships, and the promotion of a networked region." Yet, China has continued to improve many islands within the South China Sea (SCS) Beijing claims as China's sovereign territory without regard for overlapping claims and the exclusive economic zones of the other countries in the region. China's expansionist actions, combined with an uptick in Chinese naval activity and its ongoing militarization of the SCS, risk further escalation of tension within the region"[23].

The Fourth potential factor and flash point is Taiwan. China's territorial ambitions extend beyond the South China Sea, as it also views Taiwan as its integral part, despite Taiwan's self-governance and distinct identity. China's "One China" policy asserts that Taiwan is a province of China, rather than a sovereign state, and has repeatedly threatened to use force to bring Taiwan under its control. This stance has led to tensions with Taiwan and its allies, particularly the United States, which has committed to supporting Taiwan's defense. By considering Taiwan an internal part, China aims to eliminate any recognition of Taiwan's sovereignty and ultimately absorb it into the People's Republic of China. China views Taiwan as a breakaway province that must reunify with the mainland under the One-China principle. While China prefers peaceful unification, it reserves the right to use force if necessary, emphasizing its commitment to territorial claims over Taiwan. By declaring Taiwan's status as non-negotiable, Chinese leaders aim to assert their authority, deter any challenges to their claims, and ultimately, pave the way for Taiwan's eventual absorption into the People's Republic of China. "China also insists that it has been preoccupied with maintaining its national territorial integrity. Hence its positions in Tibet, and Xinjiang, and its policies toward Taiwan, as well as the reinforcement of its historical claims both in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. And China would also assert that this is nobody else's business apart from its own"[24].

John J. Mearsheimer in his book referred to Taiwan as a flashpoint between the United States and China. He argued that "Taiwan is another dangerous place where China and the United States could end up in a shooting war. Taiwan appears determined to maintain its de facto independence from China, and possibly to gain de jure independence, while China seems equally determined to reincorporate Taiwan into China. China has left little doubt that it would go to war to prevent Taiwanese independence. The United States, however, is committed to helping Taiwan defend itself if it is attacked by China, a scenario which could plausibly lead to American troops fighting with Taiwan against China"[3].

The Last but not the least potential factor is Alliances. Alliances are one of the major causes of wars. It has been a significant factor in the outbreak of wars throughout history, particularly in the twentieth century. Historically, It has led the world towards two major world wars in the twentieth century, i.e., World War I and World War II. The complex web of alliances between nations can create a domino effect, where a small conflict between two countries can quickly escalate into a larger, global conflict. The system of alliances creates a tense situation in which small conflicts can have the potential to lead to a wider conflict, and regional tensions can escalate into global crises.

Recently, the world has witnessed an alliance-like situation in the Indo-Pacific region. On one side, the US has formed close bonds with like-minded nations in the region, which includes Japan, Australia, India, Singapore, Taiwan, and many others to counter and encircle China. Clear examples of such alliances are the Quad and AUKUS. Meanwhile, China is doing the same, building strong ties with Russia, North Korea, and many others through initiatives like the Belt and Road. "In the past decades, the US has formed a few alliances in the Indian and Pacific Regions like QUAD, AUKUS, I2U2, IPEF, etc. QUAD consists of the USA, India, Japan, & Australia. The Quad intends to acquire a rules-based global direction, freedom of navigation, and a liberal exporting system. It will also provide debt financing to Indo-Pacific countries. But the basic role of QUAD is to contain strategic dominance of China across various regions like those of South China Sea, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean"[25]. The US is supporting its allies both militarily and economically so that they can compete with China in the region. The United States has taken steps to strengthen its alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, amid a perceived security threat from China.

9 CONCLUSION

To conclude, the rise of China poses a significant challenge to the United States' long-standing hegemony and superpower status, sparking an intense rivalry between the two nations. The US-China rivalry has several aspects including—economic, military, technological, and geopolitical. The Indo-Pacific region particularly the South China Sea is the center of competition between both great powers. The US is actively seeking to counter China's growing

influence in the Indo-Pacific region, while China continues to expand its global reach. Both countries recognize the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and are vying to maximize their influence, setting the stage for a potential military conflict. The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China is increasingly interpreted through the theoretical framework of the Thucydides Trap. This concept, rooted in historical analysis, posits that when a rising power, such as China, threatens to displace an established hegemon like the United States, the probability of conflict escalates dramatically. The Thucydides Trap suggests that as China's power continues to grow, the likelihood of a strategic confrontation with the United States becomes more plausible, reflecting a historical pattern where the incumbent power reacts to the rising power's challenge, often leading to war. This phenomenon is not merely a speculative theory but is grounded in numerous historical precedents where similar power dynamics led to war. This research has unveiled several critical findings that underline the complexity and potential dangers of the US-China rivalry. It has become clear that the competition extends far beyond mere economic or technological rivalry; it permeates strategic military postures and geopolitical alliances, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. The South China Sea has emerged as a significant flashpoint, where China's assertive territorial claims and the U.S.'s commitment to freedom of navigation could easily lead to confrontation. Taiwan remains another potential trigger, with China's insistence on reunification and the U.S.'s ambiguous defense commitments creating a volatile situation.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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