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Realism, the United States and China: comparison and strategic projection in the Pacific Ocean

Abstract

The strategic competition between the US and China in the Pacific is approached from the perspective of *realism*, a theory that emphasises power, national interest and security in foreign policy. Although there are political and ideological differences, both actors seek to maximise their influence in an international scenario marked by uncertainty. In order to maintain its regional hegemony, the United States has strengthened its alliances and military presence with the aim of curbing China's rise.

At the same time, China is expanding its military, technological and economic capabilities, challenging the existing order and posing a systemic challenge to US hegemony. The Pacific Ocean thus becomes the epicentre of a competition that reflects the tensions between the two nations, where the balance of power is played out in a context of growing rivalry. Understanding these geopolitical, technological and diplomatic dynamics is key to analysing the evolution of competition in this critical region within the international system.

Keywords:

Balance of power, Strategic competition, Geopolitics, Security, Rivalry.

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I Introduction: *Realism* and the Pacific Ocean, the keys to understanding the international system

In recent decades, the Pacific Ocean has become the main axis of geopolitical competition between the United States and China, two powers whose strategic interests clash in a region that is key to the future of the international order. While the United States seeks to maintain its hegemonic position, consolidated since World War II, China has emerged as a rising power, determined to reshape the balance of power in its favour. This rivalry, which encompasses military, economic, technological, commercial and diplomatic dimensions, is deployed across the spectrum of States, permeating different social strata of this power game between powers. This redefines not only bilateral relations between the two nations but reshapes the international system as a whole.

In this sense, understanding the motivations of these actors is essential if people are to discern the next scenarios of hegemonic competition that will be played out over the course of this century. The pivotal idea of this analysis is therefore introduced here; *realism* as the most appropriate theoretical branch of international relations to understand this strategic confrontation. As a theoretical tool, *realism* allows the analysis of how states develop their actions in the international environment with the fundamental premise of protecting their strategic interests, where survival and security become the main pillars of foreign action and permeate the rest of the elements around them.

This theory thus makes it possible to analyse the foreign policy structures of States from a lens that integrates elements of the balance of power and calculated strategic interests, which are influenced by elements that may be empirically tested, such as the decision-making process or geographical and economic factors, which end up defining the fundamental features of a country's foreign policy.

Based on the premise that the international system is inherently anarchic and that States act primarily in their national interests, *realism* offers a truthful lens through which to analyse the logic driving the competition between the US and China. Thus, from this perspective, both countries may be examined as actors seeking to apply reason in their operational logic where, guided by the imperative of maximising their power³ and guaranteeing their security, they are engaged in a struggle for pre-eminence in a region that is key to their respective global projections, regardless of their origins as a country, society or power.

Within the context of the Pacific, the United States and China are confronting each other not only over immediate territorial or economic interests but also over the

³ This logic is understood as *classical realism*, articulated by thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau, Edward Carr or R. Niebuhr, which underlines that the quest for power is a constant in international politics and exposes the limitations of morality in the face of more influential variables such as the balance of power or national interests, which are positioned as crucial factors for international stability according to this view. The latter, in his work *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (1953), adopts a similar approach to analysing the conditions inherent to international society.

ability to define the rules of the geopolitical game, directly affecting the stability of the international order. As China's power grows, the US perceives a direct threat to its hegemony not just in the region, thereby reinforcing a competitive dynamic similar to that described by *realism*: an inevitable cycle of confrontation and mistrust between great powers (Allison, 2017).

	America	China
Self-perception	'Number one'	'Center of the universe'
Core value	Freedom	Order
View of government	Necessary evil	Necessary good
Form of government	Democratic Republic	Responsive authoritarianism
Exemplar	Missionary	Inimitable
Foreigners	Inclusive	Exclusive
Time horizon	Now	Eternity
Change	Invention	Restoration and evolution
Foreign policy	International order	Harmonious hierarchy

Source: Allison, 2017, p.141.

Table I. Differences between China's and the United States' view of their standing in the world. Source: G. Allison (2017)

From this perspective, the US-China clash in the Pacific is not an anomaly but a natural consequence of the reconfiguration of global power, scenarios that may even be detected in various historical periods. As an example, in his work *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?*, Allison refers to a total of 16 scenarios, 12 of which involved direct conflict through war. By analysing historical rivalries, this statistic highlights the trend in which emerging and established powers frequently end up in conflict. This reinforces the relevance of his analysis for a greater comprehension of the current dynamics between China and the United States, and the potential escalation towards confrontation.

Moreover, competition in this region is not limited to only the military sphere. Both the US and China have used a variety of diplomatic and economic approaches to expand their influence in the Pacific in an attempt to secure trade routes, establish strategic alliances and project their power more broadly. These dynamics demonstrate that the Pacific region is a space of vital strategic importance in which the power projections of both actors are defined and reaffirmed.

Thus, *realism* offers a robust theoretical basis for understanding why US-China competition in the Pacific Ocean is so deep and persistent. In addition to its evolution within a context of high competition and increasing complexity. Therefore, in an environment where powers seek to ensure their survival and maximise their influence, confrontation between the two nations seems highly likely and is destined to play a decisive role in shaping the future world order.

2 *Realism in International Relations: the Case of China and the United States*

Realism is one of the fundamental theoretical pillars of the academic field of international relations, and its roots go back to thinkers who predate the formal creation of the discipline, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. In *The Prince* (1532), Machiavelli introduces the concept of power as an essential tool for the maintenance of the State and political stability. According to this author, power must be exercised pragmatically in order to ensure the survival and security of the State, even if this requires acting without moral scruples (Machiavelli, 1998). Undoubtedly, this realist view of power laid the groundwork for the later development of the theory of *realism* in international relations and was referred to on many occasions across the globe by all sorts of political and even religious figures.

For his part, Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (2017) offers an equally influential perspective by describing nature as a state where all are at war with each other, in which life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes, 2017). This pessimistic view of human nature underlines the need for a strong sovereign power to impose order and security on society. Along these lines, Hobbes argues that, in the absence of a central authority, human beings are prone to conflict due to the search for security and power. In this way, his work provides the basis for a view of the international system as an anarchic environment where States, much like individuals in nature, seek to safeguard their own security and power, characteristics that leading realist authors of the 20th and 21st centuries continue to maintain are essential today.

In the 20th century, *realism* gained ground through the contributions of major authors within this theoretical branch, such as Hans Morgenthau. In his influential work *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau described a realist theory that has been essential to interpreting power dynamics within the international system, and his postulates are key to understanding US-China relations today.

Firstly, Morgenthau argued that international politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature. In this regard, understanding these laws is essential for political analysis, as the actions of States respond to predictable patterns. Secondly, the concept of power is fundamental: political leaders think and act according to interests defined in terms of power, introducing a rational approach to international politics that sets aside ideological or personal motives. Moreover, this interest in power is a universal category, constant across time and space, although its form may vary according to historical and geopolitical circumstances⁴.

Moreover, Morgenthau argues that, while morality is relevant in political life, within the international arena, the actions of States should be judged by their effectiveness

⁴ An example of this is Russia's historical strategic focus on its borders, an issue whose policy has been a key concern from the time of Tsar Alexander II until today.

in pursuing national interests, rather than by abstract moral criteria. This distinction between individual morality and State morality is central to realist theory, which sees States acting according to a pragmatic rather than idealistic logic. At the same time, he also stressed the importance of prudence, considered the highest virtue in international politics, as States should base their decisions on a realistic calculation of the circumstances, rather than on moral or utopian aspirations.

Finally, Morgenthau understood the political sphere as autonomous, with its own logic, distinct from other fields such as economics or ethics. Thus, according to *realism*, international policy as a whole must be understood within its own framework, centred on power, security and national interests. The above postulates together constitute Morgenthau's (1990) so-called *Six Principles of Realism*.

However, the development of realist theory is not limited to Morgenthau's work. Waltz (1979), one of the most influential theorists of neorealism, in his *Theory of International Politics*, introduced a structural version of *realism* that placed renewed emphasis on the importance of the international system as a decisive element of State behaviour. Waltz argued that in an anarchic international system, where there is no central authority to regulate the actions of States, the latter must seek their own security and survival through the balance of power.

In this way, the distribution of power within the international system becomes the decisive factor in the dynamics of cooperation or conflict between States. Waltz also introduced the idea that States do not necessarily seek to maximise their absolute power, but rather to ensure their security in an environment of constant competition.

In connection with that, the theoretical advances of this branch that gives form to structural realism or neorealism may be added to *classical realism*. Developed by Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, this stream of realism emphasises the structure of the international system as the driving force behind State actions. In a system where power is constantly being redistributed, China's rise is seen as a challenge to the regional balance of power, which explains US containment and rebalancing policies designed to preserve its influence and prevent the consolidation of a direct competitor.

On the other hand, offensive neorealism, a more contemporary approach that responds to the characteristics of an interrelated international system, developed by John Mearsheimer, adds a more aggressive dimension to the analysis of State behaviour. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer (2001) argues that States, especially great powers, seek not only to guarantee their security, but to maximise their relative power to the point of hegemony in the international system. According to Mearsheimer, great powers do not trust other powers to respect the balance of power and therefore adopt an offensive strategy to prevent the emergence of rivals capable of challenging their hegemonic position.

This view is especially relevant to understanding the competition between the US and China, as both countries appear to be pursuing strategies aimed at securing their position in the Pacific, a key region for their respective geostrategic interests. It is

also possible to observe how *realism* has influenced, to a large extent, China's recent foreign policy. Since the 1970s with Mao Zedong's strategic rapprochement with the United States, it is worth noting how China has been evolving towards a pragmatic and realistic approach in the development of its foreign policy.

This historical turn, which exemplifies the first step towards the application of a realist approach, allowed China to counterbalance the influence of the Soviet Union—its main geopolitical rival at the time—and to improve its position within the international system (Kissinger, 1994). Nevertheless, *realism* continued to gain influence in Chinese politics under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who promoted a strategy of economic and military modernisation with a highly pragmatic approach, clearly separating national interests from the national idea of the Chinese Communist Party. As China has grown in power and influence, its leaders have pursued a cautious strategy, seeking to avoid direct confrontation while gradually expanding their influence in Asia and the world. This created a dynamic in Chinese foreign policy structures that has endured through generations of Chinese leaders to this day.

Among the Chinese authors who have adopted and adapted realist principles to their national context, Yan Xuetong⁵ argues that China must find a balance between acquiring power and consolidating its legitimacy in the international community. In his *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, Yan (2019) argues that great powers must not only develop their military and economic capabilities, but also win the acceptance and respect of other international actors. And while Yan acknowledges the importance of hard power, he also stresses that ethical behaviour and positive image-building are essential to maintaining a leadership position within the international system; vital elements for understanding China's deployment of soft power actions (Yan, 2011).

Another influential Chinese author is Wang Jisi⁶, who has focused on analysing China's foreign policy from a realist perspective. Wang (2011) stresses that although China has sought to integrate into the international system, it remains driven by its own power and security interests. He argues that China, like other great powers, acts pragmatically by pursuing its national interests within a context of competition with other powers, especially the United States.

Based on this analysis, China's military behaviour may be understood through realistic principles. The modernisation of its military, especially focused on expanding its naval and technological capabilities, is in the interest of protecting its national interests, especially in the South China Sea. This strategically vital region has been subject of territorial disputes and represents a key point of competition between the United States and China, with certain points of historical tension such as Taiwan, South Korea and the South China Sea. China's accumulation of military power is seen by many analysts as a direct manifestation of the principles of *realism*, where power is

⁵ Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University.

⁶ Dean of the School of International Studies, Peking University and President of the China Institute for International Strategy.

the primary tool for ensuring survival and status in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2005).

Within this context, *realism* provides a robust theoretical framework for analysing US-China power dynamics. Through its different streams, *realism* allows the understanding of how powers behave according to their national interests and their quest for security and hegemony. As described by this theory, the international system remains a competitive environment where great powers such as the United States and China seek to maximise their influence and prevent their rivals from gaining an advantage.

From the US perspective, *realism* has influenced its foreign policy towards China. As will be discussed below, the containment strategy which started during the Cold War has been adapted to modern times, with policies aimed at maintaining US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region and preventing China from expanding its influence in an uncontrolled manner. Therefore, this competition between the two powers does not only involve military competition, but also economic and diplomatic aspects, where both actors seek to expand their network of allies and consolidate their presence in key international bodies.

To recapitulate, it should be stressed that this branch of the study of international relations remains one of the most useful theoretical currents for understanding contemporary international relations. Its emphasis on power, security and national interests provides a clear lens for analysing the US-China rivalry in the Pacific Ocean. It may thus be observed how both countries, driven by their own interests of power and survival, are engaged in a struggle for supremacy in one of the world's most strategically important regions. Thus, *realism* not only offers us the tools to understand this confrontation, but also to foresee its possible developments and its implications for the international system as a whole.

3 US and China: rising powers and relative decline

The US-China relationship has been marked by a cycle of cooperation and competition that has almost inevitably evolved towards a strategic rivalry (Kissinger, 2011). This dynamic is part of a broader context of change in the international system, where the hegemony of the United States, consolidated after the Second World War, has been increasingly challenged by the rise of China and a numerous open fronts in an international system with increasingly influential actors such as terrorist groups or transnational corporations. Thus, in order to understand this confrontation, it is essential to begin by analysing the position of both countries from the hegemonic powers theory point of view. The work of George Modelski is especially relevant in this regard, as he explains how great powers rise, peak, decline and are finally replaced (Modelski, 1987).

3.1 *United States: hegemony and relative decline in the 21st century*

Since the end of World War II, the United States has enjoyed a leading position in the international system (Kissinger, 2011). Its military capacity, economic dominance and cultural influence gave it the status of a hegemonic power, which allowed it to shape the rules of the global system and guarantee an order favourable to its interests (Brzezinski, 1997). However, as Modelski (1987) points out in his theory of hegemonic cycles, this leadership is not permanent. According to this author, hegemonic powers experience four phases: rise, hegemony, decline and, finally, collapse, when they are replaced by a new emerging power. Within this context, it is possible to envisage the US entering a phase of relative decline, facing increasing competition from China, which threatens its hegemonic status and its role as a global beacon of Western security and values.

US hegemony, which was consolidated in the second half of the twentieth century, has experienced multiple challenges in the twenty-first century. Modelski (1987) argues that the decline of a hegemonic power often manifests itself in the loss of control over global economic and geopolitical dynamics. In the case of the United States, the 2008 financial crisis marked a turning point that revealed structural weaknesses in its economy and weakened its ability to lead the global financial system with the same authority as in previous decades (Modelski, 1987). Moreover, increasing domestic political polarisation and the erosion of its international image—especially after the war in Iraq and the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2022—have undoubtedly eroded its legitimacy as a world leader in the eyes of its key allies. It should be noted, however, that the United States is not withdrawing from key US foreign policy areas and its international military presence remains vital, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

Another key indicator of the relative decline of the United States may be found in the shift in the distribution of economic power at the global level. While the United States remains the world's largest economy, China has rapidly closed the gap, becoming the second largest and the engine of global growth in terms of output and trade⁷. This phenomenon, as Modelski (1987) argues, is typical of the decline phase of a hegemony, when other powers emerge as serious competitors capable of challenging the leadership of the dominant power while simultaneously reducing the hegemonic power's capacity for influence.

However, this decline does not imply a total loss of influence. The United States continues to maintain an unrivalled military capability, boosting major advances in military industry, with a global presence, and leading key institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Friedberg, 2018). Moreover, it continues to be a central power in international relations thanks to its strategic alliances

⁷ To understand the magnitude of this historic event, it is worth pointing out that China has maintained an average annual GDP growth between 2000 and 2023 of 8.29%, making it the second largest economy in the world since it overtook Japan in this global ranking in 2010.

and its network of defence agreements, which means that US strategy has two options according to Modelski's model: delaying this hegemonic shift or resuming the path of hegemony.

Additionally, China's rise and the reconfiguration of the global order present a direct challenge to its dominant global position, especially in the Pacific region, where a key part of its containment strategy is at stake. In this new phase of rivalry, the competition between the two powers has extended to the field of technology, an increasingly decisive area for global hegemony. Mastery over advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, 5G and cybersecurity, has also become a key part of strategic competition, with profound implications for 21st-century economic, military and social control.

3.2 China: the rise and reconfiguration of global power

China's rise over the past four decades has been unprecedented in recent history (Allison, 2017). Since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the 1980s, China has established itself as a major economic power and, more recently, has begun to expand its political and military power. In terms of Modelski's (1987) theory of cycles, China is in a phase of ascendancy, challenging the established US order and seeking to redefine the rules of the international system in its own interests.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	
Construction	Africa	-9%	-7%	9%	-26%	3%	-46%	-16%	8%	47%
	Central Asia	-89%	-62%	1,409%	-70%	48%	-54%	764%	-93%	368%
	East Asia	-18%	24%	-25%	5%	7%	26%	-45%	41%	-63%
	Europe	-33%	-23%	267%	-59%	79%	-37%	160%	-74%	-15%
	Latin America & Caribbean	-39%	-25%	172%	-25%	-52%	-20%	60%	423%	-95%
	Middle East	19%	60%	-22%	55%	-19%	-59%	36%	14%	35%
	Pacific	5%	18%	272%	-60%	-17%	-56%	-100%		-43%
	South Asia	294%	-58%	-36%	45%	-3%	-64%	-7%	-25%	171%
Southeast Asia	101%	28%	-18%	1%	39%	-25%	-40%	16%	8%	
Investment	Africa	-48%	12%	-49%	170%	-7%	-64%	234%	-39%	114%
	Central Asia	-74%	-76%	211%	-36%	342%	-100%		-68%	53%
	East Asia	83%	-66%	90%	20%	95%	-68%	-43%	129%	94%
	Europe	-17%	-7%	7%	-33%	56%	-80%	35%	-100%	
	Latin America & Caribbean	-92%	227%	-38%	749%	-41%	-25%	-51%	4%	108%
	Middle East	0%	769%	32%	-8%	24%	-92%	322%	341%	-43%
	Pacific	-55%	-64%	117%	-56%	253%	-100%			
	South Asia	309%	-32%	-26%	102%	-62%	103%	-93%	197%	-42%
Southeast Asia	170%	-33%	61%	-20%	-53%	52%	-69%	143%	27%	

Figure 1. Overall scope of the Belt and Road Initiative by region and project type. *Source:* Green Finance & Development Centre, FISF Fudan

China has based its rise on a combination of economic growth, infrastructure investment and military modernisation. Without doubt, it has experienced unparalleled growth since it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2000. An excellent example of

this is the Belt and Road Initiative⁸, through which China has extended its economic influence around the world, securing access to strategic resources and key markets. China's economic expansion, accompanied by its increasing military projection, especially in the Pacific and South China Sea, is evidence of the momentum of a rising power (Shambaugh, 2020). This process reflects its strategy to consolidate itself as a key regional force, taking advantage of its natural environment as a space for growth and strategic assertion.

In tandem with this geopolitical evolution, China's economic growth has transformed not only its position on the international stage but also global power dynamics. As its economy has grown, China has sought to consolidate its influence in international bodies such as the United Nations and has begun to form strategic alliances that counterbalance those of the United States, particularly in Asia and Africa.

This strategy responds to a pattern of behaviour whereby emerging powers tend to seek spheres of influence that allow them to challenge hegemonic power without directly confronting it on all fronts (Modelski, 1987). It has thus developed a series of political and economic tools that allow it to penetrate different international contexts thanks to a progressive —and sometimes aggressive— development of its soft power. This has led, for example, to the development of international organisations parallel to the traditional Western economic and financial organisations, such as the Asian Development Bank.

This is closely related to another of the most notable focal points of Chinese foreign policy in recent years, its relations with the so-called Global South. In this sense, China has strategically increased its influence in the Global South, redefining the global power landscape and positioning itself as a central figure in the development of new structures of international cooperation. This approach is manifested in its participation in forums such as BRICS, formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and has expanded with the BRICS+ proposal, which includes other emerging countries.

The importance of BRICS in China's foreign policy is not only limited to their economic weight, but also to their ability to form a cohesive bloc that can act as a counterweight to traditionally Western influences in the global financial and political arena. This effort is part of a broader strategy to strengthen South-South relations by promoting economic cooperation and mutual development among developing countries, which in turn broadens China's sphere of influence and reinforces its position as a leader among emerging economies.

Thus, within the context of these efforts, China not only continues its quest to expand its access to vital resources and markets, but also to cement its status as a

⁸ Launched in 2013, it is a vast infrastructure and economic development project spanning more than 140 countries across Asia, Africa and Europe.

global actor capable of challenging Western hegemony (Economy, 2018). As a result, the implementation of these strategies has enabled China to position itself as an indispensable leader for many developing countries, which perceive China as an alternative development model and a strategic partner in their quest for greater autonomy on the international stage.

However, this effort to boost its global leadership is not only manifested in the economic and political sphere but also extends to the military sphere. In this area, albeit with a strong internal rather than external approach, China has focused its efforts on modernising its military, especially its navy, in order to project its power in the Pacific and the South Sea. In this regard, the *China Defence White Paper* of 2019⁹ describes how the South China Sea is an area of special interest for China and places special emphasis on an active defence policy, not discarding the use of force if necessary (Jinping, 2022). An example of this has been the development of a significant military presence by building bases on artificial islands, increasing the number of patrol vessels, or the increasingly recurrent claims of sovereignty over the territorial waters of neighbouring countries.

As will be discussed below, these actions are seen by many as an attempt to assert control over a key region for world trade, and as a direct challenge to the US military presence in the region. In this stage of its rise, China is seeking to consolidate its position as the leading regional power, a goal that is in line with the behaviour of the emerging powers, which historically aspire to regain what they consider to be their own, a hegemonic position in the international order.

In this sense, from China's perspective, the country has considered itself to be a hegemonic power since time immemorial, yet in its strategic documents—for example, in its *Defence Book of 2019*—, it makes numerous references to staunch opposition to US hegemonism. Throughout its history, China has exerted significant influence over the international system, particularly in Asia, where its power was manifested through cultural and tributary relations rather than territorial expansion or military aggression towards other countries in the region (Allison, 2017).

This view, deeply rooted in its culture and history, sees China as an ancient and advanced civilisation, which played a central role in the regional balance of power, promoting order and stability without resorting to conquest or violent rule. However, this perception of benevolent hegemony was drastically altered by 19th-century events such as the Opium Wars and the humiliation inflicted by Western powers, which reduced China to a weak and fragmented State (Song, 2009).

Today, China's rise must be understood in light of this historical context. For China's leaders, regaining its position as a global power is not a matter of aggressive expansion, but of restoring the country's natural hegemonic role before its "century of

⁹ Available online at: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html

humiliation”¹⁰. From the perspective of *realism*, this process implies an accumulation of economic, military and diplomatic power to ensure China’s survival and national interests in a competitive international system, elements that are perceived in relation to its comparison with the main actors in the region.

REGIONAL COMPARISON OF THE PRC'S 2022 OFFICIAL DEFENSE BUDGET	
	2022 \$ Billion
PRC (official defense budget)	\$229
India	\$74.4
Japan	\$51.9
Russia (national defense budget)	\$90.9
South Korea	\$42.5
Taiwan	\$16.8

Table II. Regional comparison with China’s official defence budget (2022). *Source:* United States Department of Defense

However, *realism* also underlines that this rise is taking place in an anarchic environment, forcing China to act with pragmatism and caution, expanding its influence without provoking open conflict with the United States. Thus, understanding China’s projection in the 21st century through this realist lens allows for a better understanding of its strategies, which seek to reassert its status as a great power without replicating the aggressive models of Western imperialism.

Additionally, Chinese *realism*, developed by authors such as Y. Xuetong and W. Jisi, has guided many of the country’s strategic decisions. Xuetong underscores the importance of moral power as a complement to economic and military power, arguing that, to consolidate itself as a global power, China must gain international legitimacy and project an image of justice (Yan, 2019). For example, the premise of non-intervention in the affairs of other countries—a fundamental pillar of China’s historical foreign policy—may be understood in this light, which the Asian country employs to build economic and trade ties with numerous countries while positioning itself as a neutral actor.

The preservation of a pragmatic foreign policy, focused on defending China’s national interests and strengthening its influence in key areas of the international system, is also clearly observable (Wang, 2011). Both approaches converge in China’s foreign and domestic policy, thus reflecting a realistic vision of its rise, the ultimate goal being to displace the United States as the leading global power.

¹⁰ The “Century of Humiliation” (1839-1949) refers to the period in which China suffered invasions and loss of sovereignty at the hands of foreign powers. It began with the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and included defeats such as those suffered in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Japanese occupation during World War II (1937-1945).

3.3 *The Pacific as a strategic arena for China-US rivalry*

As one of the most geopolitically strategic arenas of this century, the Pacific Ocean has acquired crucial relevance in the geopolitical competition between the United States and China. This region, vital for international trade and strategic military projection, has become the main arena for the struggle for supremacy between the two powers. Controlling the Pacific means having access to strategic trade routes and being able to militarise one of the world's most dynamic areas (Mackinder, 1904). For both countries, maintaining or expanding their influence in this region is key to securing their position in the global system.

Historically, the US-China relationship has been marked by events that have deepened their rivalry in the Pacific. During the Cold War, the Korean War was one of the first direct confrontations between the two countries, which reinforced the perception of China as a communist enemy and boosted the US strategy of containment in the region (Kissinger, 1994). However, after the diplomatic opening in the 1970s, with Richard Nixon's historic trip to Beijing, relations between the two countries improved significantly, allowing China to gradually integrate into the US-led international system (Kissinger, 2011).

In recent decades, however, competition has re-emerged with greater intensity. China has strengthened its military presence in the South China Sea, which it claims almost entirely, in defiance of the principles of free navigation upheld by the US and its allies. For the United States this region is essential, not only because of its



Figure 2. Number of bilateral exercises conducted by Asia-Pacific countries with China and the United States (2003-2022). *Source:* International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

strategic value but also because it symbolises its ability to project power in the Pacific, a key aspect of its global hegemony. Washington's response has been to strengthen its alliances with countries in the region, such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, and to increase its military presence in the Pacific.

Returning to Modelski (1987), this scenario of strategic competition in the Pacific fits perfectly with the model proposed by the author, who suggests that, as an emerging power challenges the dominance of the hegemonic power, pockets of conflict emerge in key regions of the international system. The Pacific is therefore one of those arenas where the struggle for supremacy manifests itself most clearly, with both powers seeking to secure their influence and prevent the other from gaining a decisive advantage.

To sum up, the US-China relationship is profoundly shaped by the dynamics of rise and decline that form Modelski's cycles of hegemony and are largely based on realist decision-making. While the US faces a relative decline, China has managed to rise rapidly and reshape global power. Therefore, the Pacific, as the strategic arena of this rivalry, will continue to be the epicentre of the competition between the two powers, where the future of the international order will be defined to a large extent.

4 Strategic comparison from a historical point of view: United States vs. China in the Pacific arena

Once the Pacific is understood as the epicentre of geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, where two powers compete for influence in a region vital for global trade, energy resources and international security, it is worth highlighting the strategic visions of each actor. From economic and trade strategies to military alliances and soft power diplomacy, both Washington and Beijing have deployed a variety of instruments to consolidate their influence in the region, in a confrontation that extends far beyond the military to encompass multiple dimensions of international power.

Firstly, the United States has maintained a pre-eminent position within the international economic system, especially in the Pacific. Throughout recent history, Washington has promoted trade agreements that seek to integrate the region's economies under a liberal model of open trade and economic cooperation. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) —although aborted in 2017— was one of the largest US attempts to counter China's growing influence, bringing together 12 countries representing 40% of global GDP¹¹. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), launched in 2022, represents a renewed US effort to establish an economic network to counterbalance China's economic expansion by proposing trade based on more equitable and sustainable rules.

¹¹ Australia, Canada, Mexico and New Zealand are some examples of important economies that were part of this economic-trade agreement which, after the withdrawal of the United States in 2017, renegotiated and signed a new agreement in 2018 called the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPP).

In turn, China has consolidated its economic leadership in the region through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), signed in 2020, which includes 15 countries and represents the largest trade agreement in the world. The RCEP not only expands China's economic influence in the Asia-Pacific but also strengthens its ability to establish new trade rules and norms that favour its interests, directly challenging US efforts to maintain its hegemony in the region.

The *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) may also be added as its main economic tool. Thus, since its inception in 2013, the BRI has channelled over \$1 trillion in strategic infrastructure investments in Asia, Africa and Europe, as well as in the Pacific. This ambitious project connects more than 140 countries through infrastructure networks, ports and railways that seek to achieve and consolidate commercial and diplomatic alliances with key international players. However, the geopolitical implications of the BRI are clear: by providing long-term loans, China has gained economic and political influence in countries of high strategic value, such as Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands. Despite its economic benefits, the BRI has been criticised for generating economic dependency and unsustainable debts, leading to additional geopolitical tensions.

4.1 Alliances and partnerships

Strategically, the US security architecture in the Pacific has been propped up by a network of military alliances that has consolidated its presence in the region over the decades until today, adapting existing resources to the current security context. An example of this is NATO, which has traditionally focused on the North Atlantic

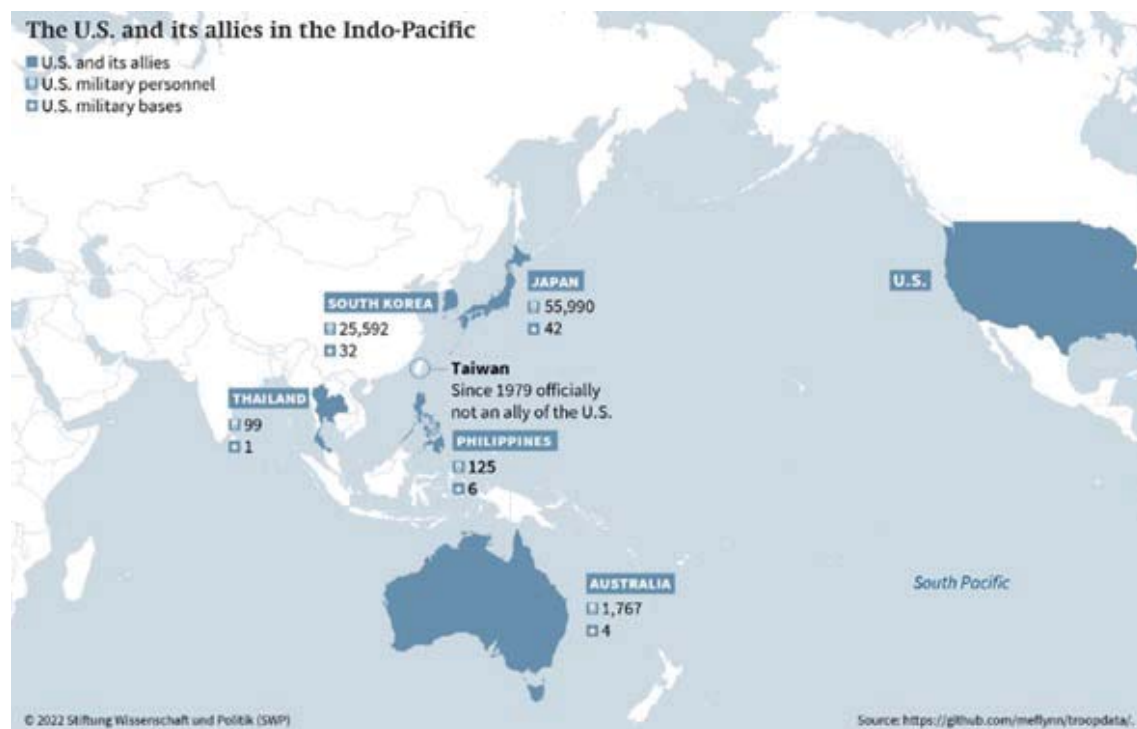


Figure 3. Major US allies in the Indo-Pacific. Source: German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik)

and Eastern Europe, but which, following the expansion of US security interests, has led to the participation of Asian countries in joint exercises and cooperation on cyber-security and defence issues.

In this sense, the key regional alliances of the United States, the organisation's leader, are articulated through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes Japan, India and Australia, and the AUKUS, signed in 2021. The latter marks a crucial step in intensifying military competition with China by offering nuclear technology to Australia, strengthening defensive capabilities in the South Pacific and countering China's growing militarisation in the South China Sea.

The US-India rapprochement deserves a special mention. As one of the region's major rising powers, and one of China's biggest competitors, India positions itself as a key player in strategic and technological cooperation in defence. The boosting of this alliance, which is marked by both countries' participation in initiatives such as the "*U.S.-India Major Defence Partnership*"¹² and the "2+2" Ministerial Dialogue with the goal of achieving significant development in the global balance of power vis-à-vis China, not only strengthens each nation's military posture, but also shapes a cohesive response to China's growing influence and military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region. This bilateral reinforcement translates into increased cooperation in critical



Figure 4. China's relations with its Pacific partners. Source: The Conversation

¹² Negotiated in 2023, this agreement involves the creation and coordination of a space for cooperation in military and defence matters between the two powers in order to generate synergies that will enable the development of joint capabilities in these areas and their mutual exchange. For further information, visit the following URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3433245/us-india-rapidly-expand-their-military-cooperation/>

areas such as military technology and defence, where both countries seek to advance interoperability and force projection capabilities.

In turn, China has relied on ASEAN as a key platform to promote its vision of regional cooperation, although ASEAN's influence has been limited by internal differences among its members. China has also pushed for free trade agreements such as the aforementioned RCEP. These alliances allow China to strengthen its economic ties while avoiding direct military confrontation in a strategy that seeks to minimise friction while consolidating its economic presence.

The United States has deployed a major diplomatic effort to maintain its leadership in the Pacific, using an approach that combines the promotion of democracy, human rights and free trade. Organisations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)¹³ have become key platforms where Washington seeks to project its vision of an international order based on clear rules. The United States has not only sought to forge diplomatic alliances through these groups, but also to counter China's growing influence by emphasising democratic values and multilateral cooperation.

In this regard, China has significantly increased its economic diplomacy, especially through the BRI, which has provided essential infrastructure investments in key Pacific countries. Beyond economics, China has used its soft power through academic cooperation programmes, scholarships and the expansion of the Confucius Institutes¹⁴, promoting an image of China as a peaceful and culturally influential power. Moreover, in the diplomatic sphere, China has sought to present itself as a defender of multilateralism, contrasting with the more unilateral policy of the United States under the Trump Administration, taking advantage of both existing international forums (ranging from the United Nations to the International Monetary Fund) or promoting its own, of which the BRICS and the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation are noteworthy examples.

4.2 United States and China: strategy and expansion

The United States has maintained a continuous military presence in the Pacific since World War II, traditionally establishing itself as the guarantor of regional security, where this idea can be transposed to the current day through the case of Taiwan. With military bases in Japan, South Korea, Guam and Hawaii, the US has secured vital trade routes and deployed a naval fleet capable of projecting power across the Pacific. RIMPAC, a multinational military exercise conducted every two years, is a clear demonstration of US military capability in the region.

¹³ Founded in 1989, the APEC is an intergovernmental organisation that promotes free and sustainable trade, economic cooperation and inclusive growth among 21 economies in the Asia-Pacific region. It was a major step in realising the growing interest that this part of the world was already starting to generate in terms of trade and economics.

¹⁴ Ever since they were established by China in 2004, there are now more than 460 Confucius Institutes in around 160 countries.

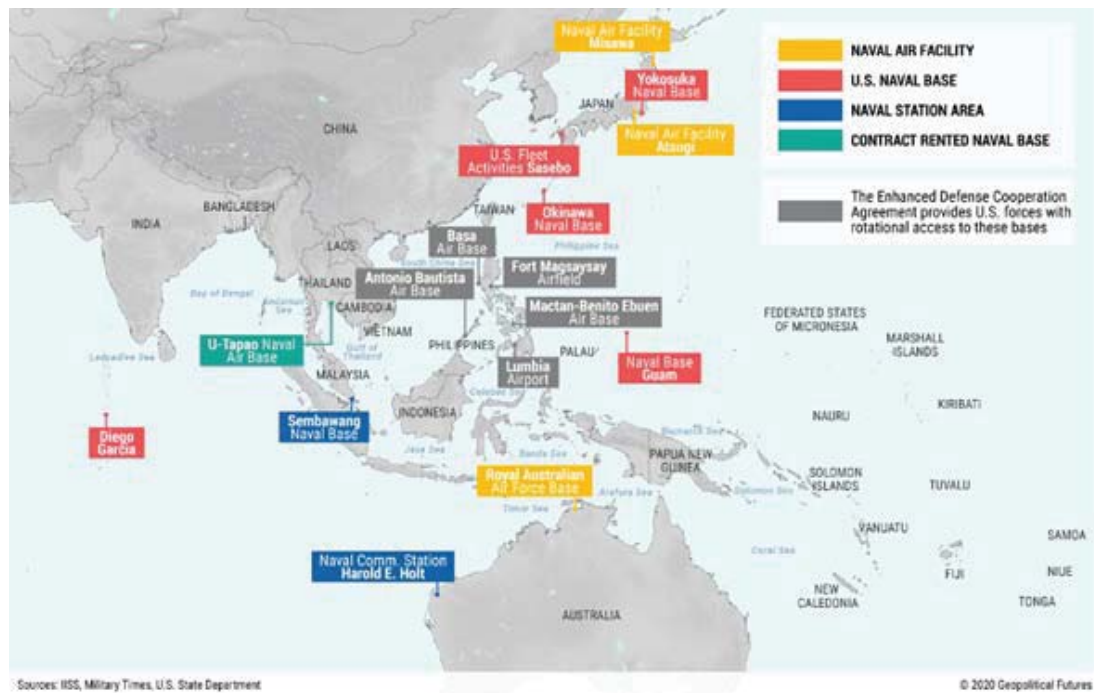


Figure 5. US facilities and bases in the Indo-Pacific. Source: Geopolitical Futures

These exercises do not only showcase US naval power, but also reinforce military cooperation with its allies, consolidating its position as a security leader in the Pacific. For example, the recent renewal of the US-Japan alliance in 2024 has taken this strategic partnership to its highest level in security and defence. This agreement significantly boosts military interoperability between the two countries, enabling the joint deployment of advanced capabilities such as missile defence systems and state-of-the-art technologies.

Japan, which has increased its military spending in recent years —reaching a historic figure of around 49 billion euros by 2024¹⁵— in response to the growing threat from China and North Korea, thus becomes an indispensable US partner in the latter's containment strategy in the Indo-Pacific. The alliance not only ensures the maintenance of a robust military presence in the Western Pacific but also sends a clear message of deterrence to China by displaying a coalition willing to defend the balance of power in the region.

This strengthening of the alliance also underlines Japan's role as a key player in regional security and as a counterweight to China's military build-up. This is in addition to the signing of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in 2023. This marks a historic milestone in bilateral relations, underlining the growing importance of Southeast Asia in the global competition between Washington and Beijing (Melián, 2023). This agreement places the US alongside countries such as China and Russia at the highest level of engagement with Vietnam, reinforcing the axis of containment against Chinese expansion.

¹⁵ To understand the importance of this figure, France allocated around 51 billion euros in defence spending in 2022.

Thus, within a context of growing tension in the South China Sea, where territorial disputes are frequent, this strategic alliance has the potential to reshape the balance of power in the region, positioning Vietnam as a key player in the US strategy to counter Beijing's influence. At the same time, deepening security and defence cooperation, especially in naval capabilities, suggests a mutual interest in strengthening resistance to China's unilateral actions in Pacific waters.

This renewed engagement not only reflects a new phase of US containment policy but also highlights Vietnam's ability to balance its relations with global powers without compromising its strategic autonomy, as it is still highly dependent in trade and economic terms on China, but without neglecting the security aspect of the decision to move closer to the US.

And finally, within the economic sphere, US influence has manifested itself through trade agreements that have integrated the region into the Western-dominated global trading system. Through free trade agreements with Japan, South Korea and other Pacific nations, the United States has maintained its economic clout, although in recent years it has had to adapt to the growing presence of China.

From China's perspective, its expansion in the Pacific in recent years has been remarkable, especially in terms of building strategic infrastructure. China has invested heavily in key ports and logistics bases, such as the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka and in the Pacific islands, raising concerns about the militarisation of these infrastructures. These ports do not only facilitate trade and transit of goods, but also serve as strategic points to strengthen China's power projection in the region.

China's Pacific strategy has been seen by many as a combination of economic expansion and military consolidation. Military reforms since Xi Jinping's rise to power have been a clear demonstration of this Chinese military and strategic ambition. Divided in two phases¹⁶, the military reforms were essentially aimed at transforming the quality of the army and adapting it to the new scenarios of competition. At the same time, Xi Jinping reinforces his role as commander-in-chief and revives Mao's idea that the Party must command the gun and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.

To this end, some of the notable achievements of these reforms include reducing the army's manpower by more than 300,000 troops, the creation of the Rocket Force (PLARF), which is estimated to reach up to 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, as well as the founding of the Strategic Support Force (SSF), tasked with managing the Chinese military's technological warfare capabilities, and the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF). At the same time, Xi Jinping continues to strengthen his and the Communist Party's influence over the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by subordinating military commanders to the Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest military authority under his leadership.

¹⁶ 2011-2017 and 2017 thereafter.

Thus, this renewed strategic vision and centralisation of military power may be seen in Xi Jinping’s reduction of China’s military regions from seven regions in 1980 to five (Sierra and Marrades, 2023). These military regions cover different areas of strategic action that essentially locate four of the five theatre commands in the Pacific—the South Sea; the East China Sea; Japan and Taiwan; the Korean peninsula; and Russia’s maritime zones of influence— highlighting both the importance of the reforms and their focus on the Pacific.

The construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, equipped with airstrips and defensive weaponry, reinforces this perception. And while China defends these actions as part of its territorial sovereignty, their impact on regional security has been significant, prompting a firm response from the United States and its allies by boosting defence capabilities and conducting joint military exercises in the region.

Of all Chinese theatre commands, the South China Sea ranks as a hotspot of territorial dispute due to overlapping sovereignty claims between China and several Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia. China claims almost the entire sea under its so-called “nine-dash line”, a demarcation that has been rejected by the international community¹⁷. These are not only energy-rich waters, with vast reserves of oil and gas, but also one of the busiest trade routes in the world, with more than \$3 trillion in trade passing through this region annually.

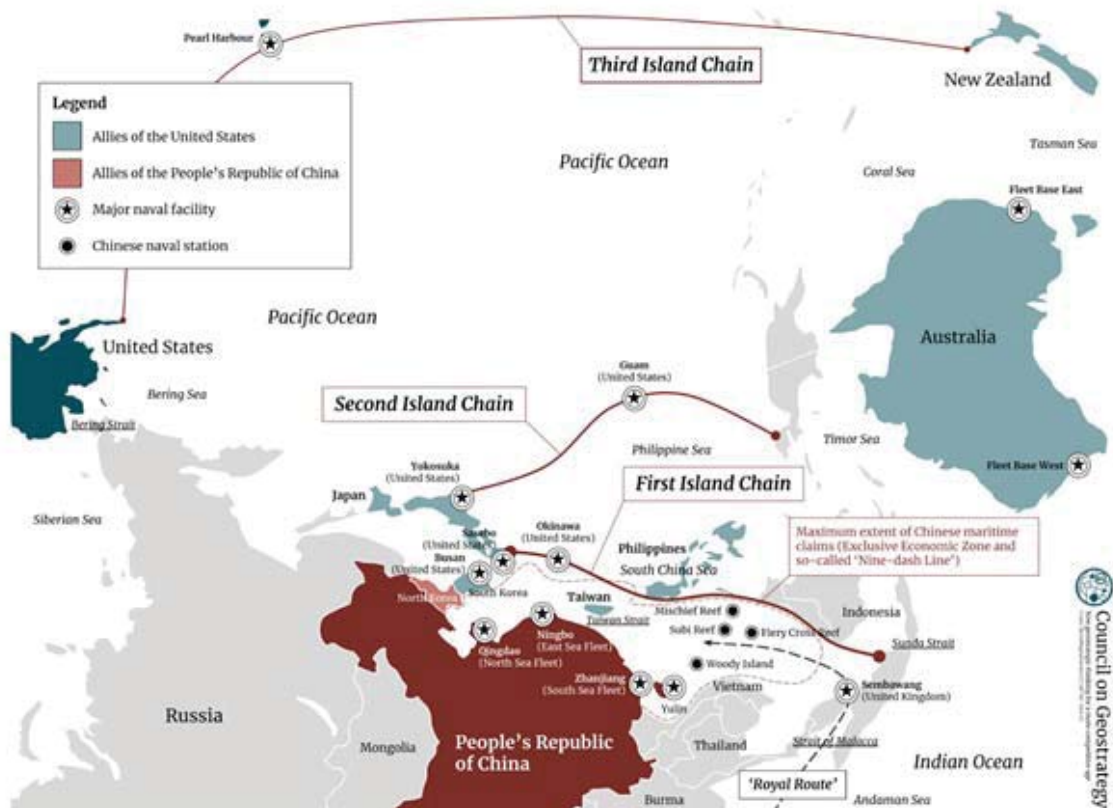


Figure 6. China's island chain strategy. Source: Council on Geostrategy

¹⁷ In 2016, a tribunal of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (not recognised by China) ruled against China's maritime claim, stating that its “historical” claims have no legal basis..

Control of strategic enclaves such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands has intensified tensions, with China building military bases on artificial islands and claiming exclusive sovereignty rights. Layered occupation, in which China surrounds islands with layers of military and civilian presence, has been a key component in its attempt to consolidate its control over these waters. Also known as the *First, Second, and Third Island Chains*—including Taiwan and the Philippines in the first chain to Hawaii and Australia in the last—, this strategy fundamentally reflects China's strategic concepts for projecting its power in the Pacific (Gunter, 2020). Despite attempts at international mediation and unfavourable rulings against China, Beijing has continued to expand its presence in defiance of the established international maritime order.

Competition in the Pacific Ocean is thus the result of a confluence of economic, diplomatic and military factors, reflecting the growing tension between an emerging power, China, and a hegemonic power in relative decline, the United States. This confrontation extends beyond a simple regional dispute to represent conflicting views of the global order, in which both powers seek to promote their respective models. As the balance of power continues to evolve, the Pacific will also continue to be a crucial scenario of competition. An amalgam of economic, military and diplomatic strategies will not only influence the future of the international order in the 21st century here but may act as a catalyst for changes in global power structures in this dynamic arena.

5 Strategic projection and possible scenarios in the Pacific

As a critical arena for hegemonic competition, the Pacific has witnessed a growing strategic deployment between the United States and China, whose power projections have a direct impact on regional and global stability. This section will analyse the strategic and military perspectives of both actors, as well as the possible scenarios that may emerge from this rivalry, highlighting the role of alliances, technology and geopolitical factors that will define the future of the region.

5.1. Indo-Pacific Influence: US perspective

Based on this analysis, it may be claimed that the US has developed a complex Indo-Pacific strategy based on deterrence, alliance-building and a constant military presence. This approach responds primarily to China's growing influence as a regional power and seeks to maintain a balance of power favourable to US interests that it has sought to maintain since World War II.

In this line, the first decisive step towards this new strategy was crystallised through the so-called *Pivot to Asia*, initially launched under the Barack Obama Administration on the basis of a 2011 article for Foreign Affairs by the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. By becoming an integral part of this new geopolitical approach, it was an essential recognition for US foreign policy, confirming its growing importance in global

geopolitics (Clinton, 2011). This strategic repositioning reaffirmed US commitment to the region, strengthening relations with key allies such as Japan and Australia, while increasing military and diplomatic presence to contain China's influence. This strategy has been continued and adjusted under subsequent administrations.

Under Donald Trump, the 2017 National Security Strategy explicitly identified China as a systemic threat, marking a shift towards a more aggressive stance towards Beijing's economic and military expansion. The trade wars, which imposed tariffs on Chinese goods, not only had an economic impact but also symbolised the growing tension between the two powers. The competition was no longer just military, but extended to trade and technology, areas where China has made remarkable progress. Tensions over the control of 5G, the battle against TikTok under the threat to US national security, or the restrictions on companies such as Huawei and the growing rivalry in the development of artificial intelligence reflect this dimension of the conflict.

Additionally, on the geopolitical front, the defence of Taiwan remains a key pillar of US policy. In order to deter any possible Chinese aggression, Washington has increased arms sales to Taiwan and stepped up naval deployments in the region. Increasing militarisation of the Taiwan Strait and Beijing's pressure on the island have made the issue a critical sticking point in China-US relations. Taiwan's defence is viewed by Washington not only as a commitment to an ally's security, but also as an act of resistance to Chinese efforts to reshape the regional order and ensure balance under the geopolitical double standards applied in the defence of the island.

Following Donald Trump's tenure, the 2022 National Security Strategy introduces a more sophisticated focus on the Indo-Pacific, with strategic competition with China as a central priority. Unlike previous policies, this new strategy focuses on *integrated deterrence*, a concept that combines not only military power but also diplomatic and technological capabilities to counter China's growing influence. The modernisation of China's military and its militarisation of the South China Sea has led the US to redouble its efforts in key areas such as the control of sea lanes and the reinforcement of its military presence at strategic points in the Western Pacific, underlining the importance of this front in the rivalry between the two powers.

Through integrated deterrence, Washington is committed to preventing any attempts by China to redraw the balance of power in the region, ensuring that its military presence and immediate response capabilities keep Beijing under pressure. As a result, for the US, controlling the Pacific is not just a matter of military power, but a key aspect of its overall strategy to contain China and maintain stability in one of the world's most dynamic and strategic regions. The new US strategy thus places particular emphasis on naval competition in the Pacific, where China's growing military capability is seen as seeking to overwhelm traditional defences within the region, involving a combination of conventional forces and cyber, space and intelligence capabilities to secure its strategic advantage over China.

5.2 The “One China” policy and its implications for the region

The arrival of Xi Jinping has undoubtedly been a turning point in Chinese history. He has brought about a renewal of China’s strategic direction in multiple areas, where his intended vision of the country in this new phase stands out. This vision may be understood through three essential slogans: The “Great Chinese Dream”, “Common Prosperity” and “One China”. This analysis focuses on the third slogan.

The “One China” policy is the centrepiece of China’s geopolitical strategy and largely defines its maritime and military projection in the Pacific, positioning itself as a central element in China’s power strategy in the region. This principle, which regards Taiwan as an inseparable part of China, has led to an increasing militarisation of the Taiwan Strait and its surroundings. Chinese military incursions in the vicinity of the island have increased in frequency, reflecting Beijing’s commitment to reunification, even by force if necessary.

In this context, it is crucial to recognise that China’s maritime strategy is confirming the theories of Alfred Mahan (1980), who argued that maritime dominance is essential to global power. By developing a modern naval fleet and militarising artificial islands in the South China Sea, China is effectively putting Mahan’s vision into practice, underlining the strategic importance of maritime control in asserting its global

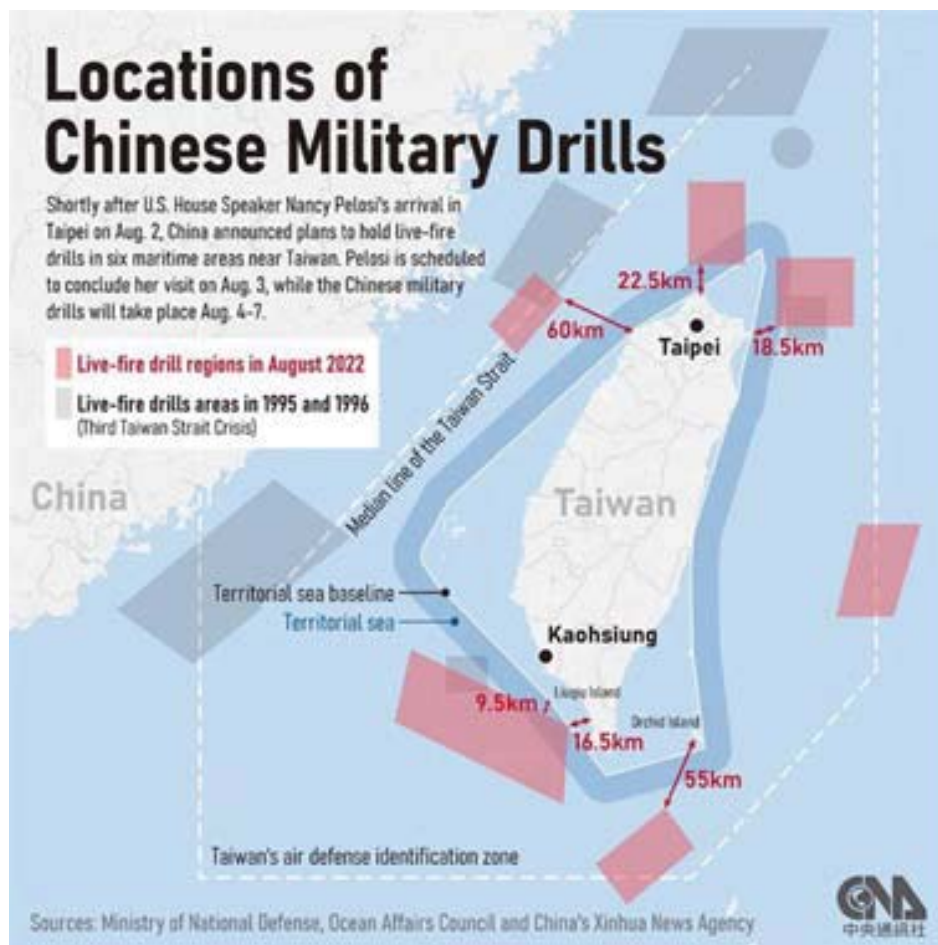


Figure 7. Comparison of China’s military exercises in Taiwan (1995-2022). Source: Xinhua News

ascendancy. These islands, which are equipped with advanced defence systems, reflect China's desire to consolidate its control over strategic sea lanes while strengthening its power projection capabilities. Control of the South China Sea is essential to secure the trade and energy routes that are vital to China's economy, as well as ensuring a "defensive belt" around its coastline.

Within this context, the militarisation of Taiwan's surroundings is of critical importance. Beijing has made it clear that it will not tolerate any form of independence on the island, and the growing military presence in the region suggests that China is prepared to use force if it perceives an imminent threat to its territorial integrity. This situation has significantly increased tensions with the United States, which remains committed to the defence of Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act (1979) and arms sales agreements, which ensure the island's defensive capability against possible Chinese aggression.

The future projection of US-China competition in the Pacific will be marked by technological and military development, with a particular focus on naval capabilities.

	CHINA		TAIWAN
	Total	Eastern and Southern Theater Command Navies	Total
Aircraft Carriers	2	1	0
Amphibious Assault Ships	3	3	0
Cruisers	8	4	0
Destroyers	42	30	4
Frigates	47	30	22
Corvettes	50	40	0
Medium Landing Ships/ Tank Landing Ships / Amphibious Transport Dock	57	50	50
Attack Submarines	47	31	4
Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarines	6	2	0
Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarines	6	6	0
Coastal Patrol (Missile)	60	60	43
Coast Guard Ships	142	N / A	168

Table III. Comparison of naval forces of China and Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait. *Source:* United States Department of Defense

The sea has become the key battleground in this rivalry, and both countries have focused their efforts on modernising their fleets. China, for example, has developed an impressive naval capability with the addition of modern aircraft carriers, such as the *Fujian*, to its growing fleet of destroyers and nuclear submarines.

Table III. Comparison of naval forces of China and Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait. *Source:* United States Department of Defense

Such weaponry will allow China to project its power beyond its immediate borders, strengthening its presence in the western and central Pacific. Additionally, China is investing in cutting-edge technology, including hypersonic missiles and missile defence systems, which will give it a qualitative advantage in the event of conflict. On the other hand, the United States remains the world's leading naval power, with

11 aircraft carriers deployed globally and a network of bases in the Pacific that allows it to project its power in every corner of the region.

However, China's growing military capability is closing the gap, and there will likely be greater parity in terms of naval capabilities in the coming years. This situation could undoubtedly generate an atmosphere of heightened military competition, especially over strategic sea lanes and disputed areas in the South China Sea.

5.3 *A scenario of controlled escalation: unstable equilibrium*

From a realist perspective, a scenario of direct confrontation between the US and China in the Pacific is indeed likely. Both countries have conflicting strategic interests, and the nature of *realism* suggests that when two great powers compete for hegemony, conflict is highly inevitable. Thus, control of Taiwan and territorial disputes in the South China Sea stand out as the most likely points of military confrontation.

China has increased the frequency of its military exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan, while the US has responded with naval deployments in the region and defence agreements with neighbouring countries. This pattern of action and reaction has created a dynamic of escalation that, in a worst-case scenario, could lead to military confrontation.

Thus, the possibility of a limited conflict between the two powers, particularly in the Taiwan Strait, is becoming increasingly plausible as tensions rise. China's increasing militarisation of the region is seen by the US as a direct threat to its hegemony in the Pacific, and therefore this situation, combined with growing nationalism and the aggressive foreign policy of both powers, could cause a small spark to ignite a wider conflict.

An alternative, and possibly more plausible, long-term scenario is that of a controlled escalation in which both powers manage to maintain a fragile balance of power in the region. Such a scenario implies the creation of geopolitical blocs and the consolidation of spheres of influence, where both the US and China deploy their respective tools of power without direct confrontation.

The Pacific region may be divided into two areas of influence: one dominated by China, encompassing much of Southeast Asia and the trade routes through the South China Sea, and the other led by the United States, centred on its alliances with Japan, Australia and other countries in the Pacific. Within this context, both powers could avoid all-out war by creating red lines and tacit agreements, as happened during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union.

However, this balance would be inherently unstable. Competition for global leadership, combined with the tensions inherent to the disputed areas, would mean that any provocation could trigger escalation. In such a volatile environment, the

ability of both countries to manage their bilateral relations will be crucial to avoid catastrophic conflict.

In this sense, the US-China rivalry in the Pacific has implications far beyond the region. This confrontation is shaping up as a civilisational clash between two models of society and governance. While the United States defends a liberal and democratic system based on economic freedom and individualism, China promotes an authoritarian and collectivist model that prioritises economic development and social stability over individual rights.

This confrontation affects not only the powers involved but also other international actors who are forced to align themselves with one model or the other. The outcome of this competition may therefore play a crucial role in defining the global balance of power and the future of the international order. While the prevailing model will significantly influence the control of the Pacific, it could also shape, to a certain extent, the civilisation and value system that will prevail in the 21st century. It is important to consider, however, that other international factors and actors will also play a role in this complex process, adding additional layers of dynamism and uncertainty to the evolution of these global geopolitical events, most notably the rise of the Global South or the evolution of the war in Ukraine.

6 Realism, strategy and power: conclusions on US-China competition in the Pacific

The analysis of US-China competition in the Pacific reveals a dynamic deeply rooted in realist IR theory, where the pursuit of power and national security are the main drivers of strategic decisions by both actors. Although both powers operate from opposing ideological visions, their foreign policy converges in a dynamic structured by the anarchy of the international system and the logic of State survival, reaffirming *realism* as the central operational framework.

For this reason, the US-China rivalry may only be fully understood through the lens of the balance of power that shapes their interactions. The United States, as a consolidated hegemonic power, and China, as an emerging force in the international system, act according to the fundamental principles of *realism*. These dynamics reinforce the inevitability of confrontation as long as power and influence remain in play. Within this context, the foreign policy of both powers develops under a strategic rationale of structural competition, where mutual deterrence and the struggle for global leadership emerge as determining factors in the configuration of the contemporary international order.

Despite the avoidance of open military conflict, rising tensions and militarisation in the Pacific raise the risk of incidents or miscalculations with destabilising consequences. As a result, this interaction between the US and China perpetuates a cycle of actions and reactions that reinforce the perception of mutual threat. This rivalry is thus

manifested not only in conventional terms but also in areas such as hybrid warfare and technological conflicts, illustrating how hegemonic powers adjust their strategies to maximise their advantage in an environment marked by structural distrust.

On the other hand, this unstable equilibrium is not limited to the military realm, but encompasses a broader geopolitical rivalry that integrates economic, technological and diplomatic dimensions, highlighting the complexity of US-China competition. In this context, the confrontation is not only about the control of territories or resources but also about the ability of both powers to influence and redefine the rules of the international system in the 21st century. This is evident in their attempts to impose opposing visions of a global order: while the US promotes a model based on liberal and democratic values, China prioritises stability, hierarchy and State-control. This dichotomy adds a significant ideological dimension to the strategic competition, intensifying the struggle to consolidate spheres of influence that will shape the future of the global equilibrium.

The future of US-China relations will therefore be marked by the constant tension between cooperation and conflict. Although both powers recognise the high costs of open confrontation, structural differences in their worldviews and competition for regional and global supremacy make direct conflict, in some of its many manifestations, a highly plausible scenario. However, the most plausible scenario is one of controlled competition, characterised by a fragile equilibrium where strategic alliances, deterrence and diplomacy structure a sustained rivalry. In this regard, the constant pressure will not only reflect the struggle for global supremacy but will also have sufficient capacity to redefine the rules of the international order, marking an era of prolonged strategic uncertainty.

To sum up, the analysis of the US-China competition in the Pacific shows how the region has become a geopolitical laboratory where differing visions of power, influence and global legitimacy confront each other. Beyond the military balance of power, this rivalry extends to critical areas such as technology and international economic norms, in which both powers seek to shape the international system in their favour. Thus, the Pacific is not only the epicentre of a clash between powers, but also the stage where the rules that could define the global order in the coming decades are being shaped.

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