

Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17560961>**POWER TRANSITIONS, THE THUCYDIDES TRAP, AND STRATEGIC RIVALRIES: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY DYNAMICS COMPETITION****Mr. Muneeb Aurangzeb**

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shafiqunnisa.ir@fuuast.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This research generally emphasizes on the character of regional alliances in the security dynamics of the regions, like QUAD, AUKUS, and ASEAN countries. Significant geopolitical changes and changing security dynamics have recently been witnessed in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly, after the withdrawal of the US forces and allies from Afghanistan in 2021. Recently, these alliances have gone through a transition period specifically between emerging powers, and superpowers in their economic and security means, respectively. How effectively does the US persuade its “Collective Defense Policy” in the region after the revival of the strategic alliances, especially Quad and AUKUS? How is political and economic-based ASEAN looking towards the US for its security, how effectively is China able to counter the “Containment Policy” of the USA and allies, and what concerns are there for security matters of the region? This chapter will examine through the lens of “Power Transition Theory”, where emerging power, (China) tries to dominate the existing power (U.S). The study will also analyze the theory of “Thucydides' Trap” by general ideas to share China's hand in the case. The qualitative method will be used to give a thorough overview of the emerging development of regional security mainly focusing on the birth of regional alliances and the Trump & Biden Administrations and China's concerns for the region. The research will combine case studies like the Taiwan Strait Crisis and, the South Korean Nuclear Crisis and give a concise analysis of the situation.

Keywords: QUAD, AUKUS, ASEAN, Power Transition Theory and Thucydides trap.

Introduction

The majority of experts concur that Asian nations face a formidable challenge in the form of potential Sino–U.S. competition, which has intensified in recent years as both powers vie for influence across the Asia-Pacific region (Aziz, Uddin, & Aurangzeb, 2025). However, the precise impact of this great power rivalry on Southeast Asia remains contested, given the dynamic interplay of political, economic, and security factors shaping regional alignments (Ali, Aurangzeb, Uddin, & Farooq, 2025). Within this complex framework, two theoretical perspectives help explain the unfolding geopolitical environment: A.F.K. Organski's Power Transition Theory—which posits that rising powers challenge

dominant ones either peacefully or through conflict—and the concept of the Thucydides Trap, describing the inevitable tensions that arise when an emerging power threatens to displace an established hegemon (Aurangzeb, Uddin, Farooq, & Ali, 2025).

The Sino–U.S. relationship today represents a strategic rivalry that extends beyond trade and diplomacy into defense, technology, and ideological domains (Uddin, Irfan, & Aurangzeb, 2025). According to the U.S. National Security Strategy (2017, 2022) and the Department of Defense reports, China is characterized as a “revisionist power” and “strategic rival” with growing economic, military, and technological capabilities capable of reshaping global order (Muneeb & Uddin, 2025). This competition has manifested sharply in the Asia-Pacific, where tensions surrounding the South China Sea, U.S. troop deployments in allied states such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, and the North Korean nuclear issue underscore the strategic stakes (Uddin, Farooq, Ali, & Aurangzeb, 2025).

The emergence of AUKUS—an alliance between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom formed in September 2021—further intensified China’s concerns, as Beijing perceives it as an “Asia-Pacific NATO” aimed at constraining its rise (Multinational Corporations and Foreign Policy, 2025). From the lens of Offensive Realism, such alliances represent the U.S. strategy to maintain its dominance by balancing against China’s growing power and influence in the Indo-Pacific (Aurangzeb et al., 2025). These shifting dynamics illustrate how the Asia-Pacific has become a testing ground for new strategic alignments, driven by competing visions of order and security in a multipolar world (Barter Trade Agreements and Digital Currency Integration, 2025).

East Asia and the Pacific thus remain among the world’s most geopolitically significant regions, where economic interdependence and military competition intersect. The regional security architecture continues to evolve, influenced by historical legacies and emerging power politics that are redefining the global balance (Uddin et al., 2025). Consequently, understanding this transformation through both theoretical and contemporary geopolitical lenses provides a foundation for examining how Asia’s future will be shaped by the Sino–U.S. contest for supremacy.

Historical Context

The 1951 stamping of the Course of action of San Francisco influenced East Asia's security environment inside there is a long time after World War II. Through the establishment of a framework for security courses of development, this course of action, which included Japan and the Related Powers, laid the establishment for regional solid quality. The geopolitical scene of the area was changed inside the taking after decades by the progress of budgetary mammoths like China and South Korea as well as Japan.

East Asian cities were s influenced by several events that happened towards the end of the 20th century. The Taiwan Strait crises, especially those that happened between 1995 and 1996 and late after 2021, brought in the thought of how flawed the peace is and how there is emphatically a chance for larger-scale showdowns.

The Asia-Pacific region has as of late seen striking shifts in security stream and geopolitical shifts. The objective of this examination is to perform a comprehensive examination of the security scene that is changing in East Asia and the Pacific, looking into unused issues, vital causes, and potential collaborative ways.

The most recent events after 2014, annexation of Crimea by Russia (2014), the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan (2021), and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022) influenced the regional hegemony of the US in the world. A Thucydides Trap has been observed where China aggressively operates the regional matters and the US tried to counter its strategies to maintain its hegemony in the regionally and globally.

The USA, China, And Regional Security

The National Security Strategy of 2022 states that China is "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do it." (Harris & Johnson, 2022). China has also changed its foreign policy in the meantime. Numerous scholars have noted that China has stepped up its assertiveness, particularly in the context of the South China Sea disputes. (Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 2012)

For more than a decade, successive administrations in the United States have struggled to prioritize the Indo-Pacific. Although President Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy has placed the region at the top of Washington's global priorities, US rhetoric has been matched only partially with the actions and resources required to transform its regional strategic position following years of underinvestment.

Rebirth of QUAD

One new agreement to support an international order based on norms in the Indo-Pacific region has emerged the Quad, which consists of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. This arrangement may be the most significant one. Due to Australian decisions, the quadrilateral collaboration ended in 2008; nevertheless, given China's advantages, there was in any event little desire in any of the four capital cities to continue the partnership. (Flitton, D, 2020).

The Quad was brought back to life in 2017, advanced to the ministerial level over time, and then to the leadership level in 2021. According to the Fact Sheet of the Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022, which by "The White House" on May 23, 2022, the Quad has evolved from being a talk shop or an unduly bureaucratized international organization to several issue-specific working groups since 2021. A huge defense budget of the USA and its allies (Australia, Japan, and India) to counter China's strategy in the region indicates tensions in the region.

In addition to the ongoing Malabar naval exercise, the Quadrilateral defense cooperation is now concentrating on specific outcomes like supply chain, cybersecurity, cybersecurity, scientific education, COVID-19 vaccines, infrastructure, humanitarian aid, and space-based earth observation. These initiatives seek to show a significant influence on bolstering the regional order, reducing the exclusivity and threat posed by the Quad to partners in the Indo-Pacific area, and generating global public goods.

The Quad, a collection of nations with an emphasis on supply chains, commerce, digital cooperation, environmental issues, anti-corruption, and tax laws, is probably going to stick around as one of many parallel initiatives to support the developing international order in the Pacific Region.

AKUS (America Korea United Society) and Nuclear Submarine Deal

At all costs, Australia relies on the AUKUS deal with the nuclear submarine as its main pillar, even at the risk of cutting off ties with France. The true submarine transaction happened in 2021 and it caused Paris to abruptly pull out of the A\$90

billion French "contract of the century" with the supplier Naval Group. Australia's main contention is that they will be unable to confront the unsettled strategic situation during the possibly catastrophic 1930s unless French nuclear-powered submarines arrive considerably later than planned. The rehabilitation of six aging Collins-class submarines and the overall submarine replacement program implemented by both Liberal and Labour governments over the previous years was by Australia a national failure. Due to the longer procurement timeline, Australia will not be able to deploy its post-Collins conventional submarine fleet with the requisite capability until the 2050s. (Mole, 2021). Australia now hopes to change its perspective on strategy and resume taking the development of submarines seriously to close the capability gap. Therefore, why would not Australia choose a quicker and less expensive solution like AUKUS to make a significant advancement in Australian security, given that the US has a larger interest in defending treaty friends, including Australia, in the strategically important Indo-Pacific region? (Wilkins, 2021)

Biden administration figures have expressed support for Australia, but US businesses have capitalized on Australia's lost market in China. The Morrison Government has unsuccessfully appealed to the US for surplus Pfizer doses. (Davis, 2021).

Australia has fought alongside the US in every major war since World War II, yet amid the US pullout from Afghanistan, Australia has hardly received a phone call. (Sky News Australia, 2021).

To lessen its dependency on resource exports to China and to promote national security and economic growth, Australia has raised its investments in the military sector. The US and Australia have a high level of confidence, which has made it possible to acquire cutting-edge military technology in areas like military drones and hypersonic weapons.

Australia's defense sector cooperation with the US and UK will be made easier by the new AUKUS mechanism. Morrison made the announcement right away that he intended to construct a nuclear submarine project in South Australia, a state with a robust shipbuilding sector that employs over 8,000 people.

To prevent another conflict on the Korean Peninsula, the US put pressure on South Korea to renounce its program. The South Asian nuclear race began in the late 1990s and once India showed it could hold off China with its nuclear weapons, the US removed sanctions against the country.

Despite its military use, Australia is receiving nuclear submarine technology from the US and the UK. Australia plays a crucial role in the plan because of its strategic anchoring in the South Pacific and the US's move reflects its concentration on the Indo-Pacific area. The Biden administration is demonstrating its might and fortifying the coalition.

China and Russia have an unbreakable strategic cooperation, but since Trump took office, the US and Europe have been more estranged as Europe, led by Germany and France, has become more independent in its interests despite China's relentless ascent. (Asia Pacific Assessment 2022).

The US is the only island in AUKUS that faces both the Pacific and the Atlantic seas, giving it a vital location. This facilitates the US Navy's freedom of movement in the Atlantic and Pacific and makes conventional assaults on the US mainland more difficult. Britain continues to have the strongest naval force in Europe and AUKUS enables the UK to protect and secure the Atlantic alongside the US in the

event of an assault or retreat, as well as to help the US advance and take control of the Pacific.

Given that the enormous South Pacific and Indian Oceans serve as both perfect hiding places for Australia's nuclear submarines and natural security obstacles, the country's nuclear submarines have the potential to transform Australia's vulnerability of being remote and isolated into a vital strategic strength. Japan is not the best place for marine control, even if it is more powerful than Australia and is following America's example. Japan is only an outpost for the US to devour its enemies.

ASEAN'S Shifting Poles

With the US and UK introducing nuclear-powered submarines, AUKUS poses a serious threat to ASEAN, which is situated across the water from Australia. The robust cruising capabilities, fast navigation speed, and nuclear missiles of these submarines are benefits. The establishment of AUKUS could upset the great power balance that ASEAN countries have always used to maintain security.

The possibility that AUKUS could thwart ASEAN's efforts to maintain a nuclear-free zone also poses a security risk. To create an area free of nuclear weapons, ASEAN nations signed the Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in 1995. However, due to disagreements with the treaty and protocol's wording, the US declined to sign the agreement.

AUKUS would hinder ASEAN's political and security integration by dividing the region. Reactions to AUKUS among ASEAN members have been inconsistent. With the belief that "Increasing the capacity of a close partner to project power should stabilize rather than upset the equilibrium," Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. supports AUKUS. (Mustafa, 2021). (Lamb & Beo Da Costa, 2021) ASEAN nations' polarized views on the AUKUS treaty, influenced by security policymaking, US requests for security protection, and perceptions of China's dangers, hinder agreement on the deal and hinder the implementation of the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025 and regional integration, as well as the idealistic "Indo-Pacific" conception.

American Calculations

After India demonstrated that its nuclear weapons could deter China, the US withdrew the severe restrictions that it had previously imposed on the country due to its nuclear proliferation.

The United States and the United Kingdom are actively pushing Australia's nuclear submarine technology because it is an essential strategic anchorage in the South Pacific and puts the US in a good position to execute its Indo-Pacific strategy. Australia's vulnerability of being remote and dispersed will immediately be upgraded to a vital strategic strength by obtaining nuclear submarines. Australia's natural security barriers, the wide South Pacific and Indian Oceans, also offer its nuclear submarines the best possible hiding place and maneuvering area. Australia's nuclear submarines can support the US blockade of the key sea lanes by quietly confronting the enemy at any time and moving forward out of the Western Pacific's first island chain.

Australia offered nuclear submarine technology by the US and the UK, who understand how important it is to retain strategic dominance in international affairs, especially in the face of competition from China.

Collective Defense Strategy

After almost 75 years as the most important military power in the region, the United States can no longer maintain a favorable balance of power alone in the Asia-Pacific. (Townshend, Noone, and Steward, 2019). Many American strategists have slowly come to understand this geopolitical reality. (Colbe, 2020). Two trends have brought the American defense strategy to this point.

Although Trump's transactional approach to allies and partners prevented the US from making significant progress on implementing a collective framework, the administration's vision for a coalition defense strategy, New Delhi, and T took root in US defence-policy circles.

Biden's administration's vision for a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' is, like its predecessor, based on a sober assessment of the limits of US power and the imperative of increasing burden sharing.

We will coordinate our efforts across war zones and conflicts to ensure that the United States, together with our allies and partners, can deter or defeat aggression in any form or domain ... [in addition to] finding new ways to link our defense industries, integrate. Our defense supply chains and co-produce key technologies that strengthen our shared military interests. (White House, "US Indo-Pacific Strategy")

Thus, the American strategy has three clear lines of action: "to prioritize the Chinese challenge in the Indo-Pacific"; the modernization of the United States' own "defense" and "capabilities"; and strengthening joint action with allies and partners. Position a favorable balance. (Department of Defense, 'Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy')

Chinese Concerns in The Region

AUKUS nuclear submarine, which is a component of the "Asia-Pacific version of NATO" being formed, poses a serious threat to China. China has a decent chance of succeeding this time since Australia and Britain are the closest to joining the US in war operations abroad.

There are two aspects to China's perceived threat: a military component and a strategic one. To encircle China, the Biden administration has been advocating value diplomacy techniques including forging democratic alliances. It AUKUS might have a deterrent demonstration influence on China and the Quad might cooperate militarily in a similar manner. Japan might potentially pursue obtaining nuclear submarine technology through the US-Japan alliance or the trilateral cooperation arrangement between the US, Japan, and Australia.

AUKUS would intensify the battle and jeopardize the strategic equilibrium. The nuclear-powered submarine, when deployed to South China plays a crucial role in the air, surface, and underwater anti-submarine net that the United States and its allies have put up. The US's policy of using NATO as a weapon to drive Russia out of Europe since the 1990s replicated in its operations against China, especially in the Asia Pacific Region.

Since the US biggest danger to China's national security, the US is at the center security strategy in the Asia-Pacific area. The US perceived as the main barrier to China's national security strategy, the unification of Taiwan and the expectation that a growing China will eventually come to war with itself. All facets of China's security strategy in the region are affected by this competition, including its motivators and influences, changing security objectives, evaluation of the US, possible flashpoints, and military readiness for future hostilities. Nevertheless,

bolstering China's security will unavoidably provoke retaliation from other nations, undermining its security.

Conclusion

Trump administration has characterized China as a revisionist state and strategic rival, causing a shift in the US approach to China. The 2022 National Security Strategy adopts a tougher stance towards China by the US and its allies in the East Asia and Pacific region. 21st-century security paradigm has evolved due to non-traditional threats like territorial disputes in the South China Sea, US deployments in the region, and the North Korean nuclear dilemma.

The Biden administration advanced significant lines of work toward the US's development of a more comprehensive and coordinated defense in the Indo-Pacific region. AUKUS cooperation, assistance, posture investments, restraint in Ukraine, and disengagement from Afghanistan are among the major accomplishments. To operationalize a framework for collective defense, the defense administration must rebuild positive relationships with partners and friends in the region. The US Policy instigates the race of "Armament and Nuclear" in the region by supplying nuclear facilities to South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan.

In the Asia-Pacific area, especially in the Korean Peninsula, East China Sea, Taiwan, and South China Sea, the US, and China are placing more emphasis on US-centric threat perception and strategic planning. Conflicting ideas about the security framework for the area are the cause of this change, which is making their relationship more hostile. Beijing worries about a regional arms race; while China is concerned about, the US enlarging security ties and partnerships. It is anticipated that Taiwan will emerge as the most dangerous and acrimonious flashpoint between the US and China, making it imperative for regional actors to manage the fierce competition in the Asia-Pacific. US policies that relied on the regional powers will have long-term strategic objectives, which took time for fruitful results.

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