

# US–China Tit-for-Tat Politics in the Asia-Pacific

## Beyond Thucydides Trap to Multipolarity and Complex Interdependence

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### Abstract

Changing geopolitical dynamics, with China's emergence as a key player and the declining role of the United States as a superpower, have shifted focus toward the Asia-Pacific region. Today, the region has become home to numerous flashpoints as China seeks to turn power balance in its favor, while the United States is leery of Chinese intentions. Nevertheless, to mitigate this threat, the United States under the Obama administration had already turned foreign policy focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific with the policy of "Pivot to Asia." Along with Trump came a newfangled strategy of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific thereby including the Indian Ocean as part of the great game. Hitherto, the most relevant discourse for explaining this power competition between the two competitors is the "Thucydides Trap." According to which, in a binary setting where both a rising and declining power exists, war is inevitable. However, this oversimplified assumption has limited the cognizance of the Asia-Pacific region, which emerged as a result of the liberal order and is heading toward complex interdependence, even superseding the West as the epicenter of economic development. Therefore, this article argues that there are multiple discourses to understand the Asia-Pacific region with the small powers playing an important role in

rebalancing and creating multipolarity in the region. Moreover, this complex world of interconnectedness compels both the competitors to find a middle ground for cooperation. Finding out the extent to which these discourses are entwined and influence each other is also an objective of this research.

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As the Cold War ended, theses on the “end of history” took international politics by storm as policy makers began projecting the forthcoming trajectory of the global system. The Western-led liberal order became predominant with democracy and capitalism being the most relevant aspects of the unipolar world. Nevertheless, in following decades, we saw a gradual decline in US relative power, and the reemergence of China as a major player with expanded global clout. The United States, because of extensive military engagements in the War on Terror post-9/11 and due to subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, along with the involvements in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, has suffered exhaustion and a waning of its global war fighting capacity. Hence, this power transition between the two opened debates about the Thucydides Trap.

US policy makers realized the need to fill the power vacuum in the Asia-Pacific region and to counter the increasing influence of China across the region. Therefore, the Obama administration in 2011 announced its “pivot to the Asia-Pacific” policy.<sup>1</sup> This entailed a shift from military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan toward a deeper strategic immersion in the Asia-Pacific that brought the disputed South China Sea into the ambit of stratagem. The same policy was followed by the subsequent administration, however, Donald Trump upon taking office replaced it with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.

The main contour of FOIP is to counterbalance China’s mounting influence and to contain its assertive moves and militarization.<sup>2</sup> Undermining this, however, Trump moved toward isolationism; his maximum pressure policies and incessant engagement in the blame game left a question mark on US capability to act as a superpower leading the world. Therefore, this power transition, with China’s emergence as a responsible key player and the United States taking a more passive role, has opened a new arena of debate about the future of geopolitics. Realistically looking into world politics, it’s all about power struggle—where a state such as China that is gaining prestige is trying to challenge the status quo thus far maintained by the United States. China is consistently working upon its economic, human resource, and military development to expand its clout over the neighborhood and beyond.

Xi Jinping plans to surpass the United States by 2049. China intends to overtake America by means of influence and national strength.<sup>3</sup> China's goal in the near future is a new order led by China instead of the United States. This power game between the two can be explained by Gram Allison's concept of Thucydides Trap while referring to the collision course and additionally looking at other regional and small states in the realm of balancing game. According to Allison, these small powers either bandwagon or join alliances to maintain regional balance.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this article argues the need to look beyond such an oversimplified explanation of Thucydides Trap to other discourses and actors such as Japan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India, and Australia.

There are multiple discourses with which to comprehend the Asia-Pacific region. Hence, this article attempts to analyze these discourses and their relation to the predominant thesis of Thucydides Trap in the Asia-Pacific. The second part of this article will attempt to build up this predominant thesis in relation to China's rise. Moving further, the third section will explicate the policies undertaken by the Obama and Trump administrations, and how the Biden administration's outlook differs from them. Finally, the fourth section will explain the relevance of other discourses and their relationship with Thucydides Trap in Asia-Pacific.

### **China's Emergence as a Great Power**

China's rise has invigorated ample interest among scholars and historians. Many of them criticize the Eurocentric thesis that refers to China's growth as "oriental backwardness." For them, China used to be a global leader in terms of technological development between 1100 and 1800 CE.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the Industrial Revolution in Europe was the upshot of borrowing and assimilating Chinese innovations. Therefore, we can refer to China's recent growth as its reemergence because it once used to be at the apex of the clout structure.

However, one must not confuse China's current development with its past as today it is largely the product of the Western-led liberal order that ensured the unrestricted flow of energy supplies and other key commodities to Chinese factories. By this China was able to integrate itself into this complex globalized world after years of isolationism and reap the best from it. Initially, China pursued the policy of a peaceful rise with its focus mainly on economic growth. Nevertheless, this under-the-radar policy plan saw a major shift with Xi Jinping coming to power as the president of China in 2012, to whom China's role is that of a great power.<sup>6</sup>

Adding to this was the power vacuum created by the United States which provided China with a strategic opportunity to fill the global leadership void. Today, Beijing presents the Chinese development model as an alternative to the

dominant neoliberal system. This idea was presented by Xi Jinping in his United Nations General Assembly speech in 2015, whereby he referred to the importance of both market forces and government control for efficacious economic functioning. In addition, Xi's Belt and Road Initiative is a major infrastructure development project that connects the world together and provides numerous opportunities to poorer economies.

Moreover, China contributed to at least 22 multilateral institutions as an alternative to US-led system. For instance, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, BRICS, and so forth. China has also projected itself as a global leader by undertaking new initiatives, such as the 2016 G20 summit in Hangzhou, and went on to have a focus role in the Paris Climate Settlement and Iran nuclear deal, and most recently acted as a responsible power by standing with the world in COVID-19 pandemic.

Having provided poorer countries with medical supplies, vaccines, and aid, China has very well increased its soft power status. However, this all has been possible only with former US president Donald Trump providing China with an opportunity to play cards. Now, the game will continue as President Xi depicted his intentions in the 19th Party Congress. He said, "China will keep on doing its job, it will act as a responsible player and would be working toward the world governance."<sup>7</sup> To achieve this goal, Chinese policy makers were seen pursuing wolf warrior diplomacy, defending China's actions and policies in an assertive manner.

Yet, this is only the result of President Xi taking charge. Therefore, the next section discusses the US policy shift to the Pivot to the Asia-Pacific strategy and how the inclusion of the Indian Ocean has made Thucydides Trap a predominant lens for explaining the Asia-Pacific region.

### **US Policy Shift: From the Middle East to Asia-Pacific Region**

The Asia-Pacific has always been a center of US attention. The balancing game started here after the Pearl Harbor attack in World War II since the region is home to its Pacific alliance including Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. In the Cold War era, the United States struggled to undermine the influence of the Soviet Union by cooperating with the Pacific alliance, however, in the post-Cold War era the major challenge came in the form of China's emergence as a major power.

Therefore, US focus shifted toward containing the influence of China and ensuring continuous commercial and military contact across the Pacific. Despite the Clinton administration referring to China as a "strategic partner," relations were

distraught due to the Taiwan crisis.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the Bush administration began to perceive China as a “strategic competitor.” Hence the great game began, with each year adding to the already persisting competition.

### ***Obama’s Pivot to Asia: A Rebalancing Strategy***

An important development during Obama’s administration was the US foreign policy shift toward the Asia-Pacific region. In 2008, the United States was undergoing a global economic recession, and had lost around six thousand US soldiers along with millions of dollars. Oppositely, China was growing rapidly and expanding its sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, Obama developed a rebalancing strategy toward the Asia-Pacific that was centered on maintaining global leadership, repairing economic growth, shifting resources from the Middle East to Asia-Pacific, and coping with China’s increasing power.

This move toward the Asia-Pacific was meant primarily to contain China—right after getting into the region, the United States started investing massively both in economic and military means. Thus, making the region a hot belt between the two. Some of the developments undertaken by the United States are mentioned down below, starting with Obama’s initial move back in 2011 when he announced the region to be a geostrategic priority for the United States. Similarly, we have then–secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who announced that, since war in Iraq had ended and America had begun withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, America stood at a pivot. She stressed that, in the coming ten years, the United States needed to be critical about where it was investing as it needed to maintain its leadership, interest, and values.<sup>9</sup> Hereby, the United States for the first time openly exhibited its intentions as far as the region is concerned. Mentioned below are some of the ways the United States tried to achieve its objective in the region.

Military deployments. Initially there were more military engagements as America strengthened its traditional alliances and pursued avenues for new military cooperation. In 2012, the United States deployed 60 percent of its navy under the newly revitalized Pacific command. Moreover, in 2010 the Pentagon announced an investment of \$12 billion to build up the fighting abilities of its troops in the region and planned for upgrading Guam military base and constructing more bases around it.<sup>10</sup> Under this strategy, the United States developed the Air-Sea Battle doctrine as a counter to China’s area denial capabilities in the region. Then it started joint military exercises in the Korean peninsula with South Korea. This partnership strengthened after threat from North Korea nuclear muscle. Moving further, with Japan the United States has a strong alliance, as the United

States considers Japan to be crucial for not only regional but also international security.

Therefore, the United States deployed Osprey aircraft at Okinawa along with bringing Diaoyu Island under its security treaty umbrella. The United States also had the X-Band radar positioned in Japan when North Korea tested its nuclear bomb in 2013.<sup>11</sup> In Port Darwin, the United States stationed approximately 250 Marines for reinforcement of the second island chain and to strengthen its defense treaty with Australia. With time, US surveillance over the region increased and littoral combat ships were positioned in Singapore. The United States then signed a military agreement with Vietnam. Important as well is India, with which the United States has had a longstanding security partnership and with which it held the greatest number of military exercises apart from the military developments. The United States increased its diplomatic influence in the region by engaging in multiple regional organizations and helping to solve issues of nonproliferation, disaster management, climate change, and so forth.

The rationale behind these engagements was to maintain US status as a Pacific power and to keep an eye on China within the region while increasing its legitimacy to intervene on regional security matters. Similarly, the United States also modified its policy of nonintervention in the South China Sea and started supporting the parties at dispute against China, such as the Philippines and Vietnam. Also, with them it signed defense agreements and started joint drills against China's nine-dash line in the SCS.

Economic incentives. An economic giant such as China must be countered economically as well, and so the Obama administration produced a regional economic cooperation mechanism in the form of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP was intended to ensure US freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean as economics is linked with trade through the seas; the thought was that once involved economically, the United States could more easily engage in regional disputes. Moving further, the United States has invested around \$1.9 trillion in the region in terms of trade.<sup>12</sup> Through the BUILD Act, it again invested \$60 billion in the private sector. For the energy sector the United States has lent \$29 million to Mekong states, working on 11 renewable projects.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the United States launched ITAN, USTADA, and started the Blue Dot network.

As a whole, the United States remains successful on economic, military, and diplomatic fronts. It smartly got involved in regional affairs, exploited maritime disputes, and increased tensions between China and other regional states such as Japan and India. Thus, its allies are now willing to take actions against Chinese preponderance in the region. Yet, this all came with huge cost for the United States as it had to redraw its military deployment in the Asia-Pacific that in turn



impacted its economic structure. Similar policies followed afterward, except now including the Indian Ocean.

### ***Indo-Pacific Strategy***

American policy makers since the implementation of the pivot to Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy knew the inadequacies it has in complementing US grand strategy in Asia. Therefore, President Trump, being aware of such limitations, produced a new policy to ensure commitment toward US Asia-Pacific allies in terms of security in the region. Also, as the Indian Ocean became a core US interest for geoeconomics and geostrategic purposes, the new policy of FOIP was meant to incorporate it in the great game.<sup>14</sup> FOIP aims to counter China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean, including its military base in Djibouti and deepened ties with nearby countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

The Trump administration initially named its policy as Indo-Asia-Pacific to include the entire Pacific and the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> Later, the name was changed to the Indo-Pacific thus depicting US security considerations vis-à-vis China. This strategic shift is very pertinent as it is the first time that the United States has openly referred to China as its competitor in the region, and throughout its *National Security Strategy* (NSS) document the United States accused China of overmilitarization, illegal expansion, malign intentions in the South China Sea and East China Sea, human right violations, its debt trap policy, and so forth. The NSS depicted China as an aggressive state, and the United States as a responsible actor in the region that is only concerned about the security and prosperity of its allies in the Asia-Pacific.

Part of this strategy is to ensure the United States free and open access to the oceans, to devise such an order in the region that no rogue regime such as China, North Korea, or Russia can challenge. Considering this, the United States has started focusing on new development projects in the regional states. As former US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo pledged \$113 million to deal with cyber security threats, energy programs, and economic projects.<sup>16</sup> Yet, for the United States to counter China's influence it must strengthen its regional alignment, and that is why it works toward reinvigorating the QUAD-Plus Dialogue.

Today, states have begun to pursue a more aggressive stance toward China. For instance, India from the very start wanted to gain regional hegemony and the major threat against hegemony came from China—and so India necessarily wants to counter it. Japan reinterpreted its constitution to increase security cooperation with the United States against China. As a whole, the United States in its NSS document while intending its goal to contain China's influence stated these regional small powers as a force multiplier and is working toward improving their

defense capabilities to make them a strong counterbalance against China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Now, having analyzed the intense competition going on between the two states, where they are engrossed in complete tit-for-tat politics, it seems as though there is no way out from such a tough battlefield. That's why academics commonly use Thucydides Trap to characterize the geopolitical rift between two. However, with deeper analysis there can be other ways to understand these dynamics. As the Asia-Pacific is not limited to only two states, China and the United States, but other key players with which both states are at the same time engaged with and dependent on. So, focusing entirely on these two great powers and ignoring the other players of the game is not a rational calculation.

Therefore, the section down below will uncover the role of small powers in the supposed game of two and will explicate how we can find a way out beyond Thucydides Trap.

### **Thucydides Trap and the Great-Power Struggle**

The US–China power struggle in the wider Asia-Pacific region is commonly understood through the Graham Allison concept of Thucydides Trap. However, this simplified explanation of complex regional dynamics comes with many strings attached. Explaining the region primarily in security dynamics with the United States and China as major competitors to each other would make the policy makers in Washington and Beijing think that they are caught up in a zero-sum game where only retreat can avert a conflict, and that war is otherwise inevitable. Moreover, this contributes to another policy of containment whereby each state looks for means to counter the other's capabilities in the region, leading to the intensification of regional security dynamics.

As a result, small powers being caught up in the dilemma must think of joining one of two sides, in turn reinforcing the narrative of a new Cold War.<sup>17</sup> This miscalculation could have dangerous implications for the security of the region. Therefore, it is imperative to comprehend the changing power distribution in the region from a different perspective. Today this globalized world of complexity and interconnectedness compels states to look for an alternative, to find a middle ground that constitutes order and stability within the Asia-Pacific region.

As the aspirations of the states keep on changing and are often influenced by the institutions to which they are a member, there is a need to take all possible discourses into cognizance to realize the geopolitical intricacies that this region poses, including the roles played by small states along with the two great-power competitors. So, this part of article will first explain the dominant discourse of Thucydides Trap and will then analyze its relation to other discourses at play.



The Thucydides Trap was initially coined by Harvard professor Graham Allison in 2012. The name and principle were both derived from the concept explained by Thucydides in his description of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta. According to Thucydides, the war was inevitable between two because of Athens's increasing power that had generated fear in Sparta.<sup>18</sup> A similar understanding is applied by Allison to the US–China power competition whereby he believes growing Chinese capabilities that pose a threat to the status quo maintained by the United States will lead to war.

Nevertheless, China has no intentions of engaging in war with the United States as President Xi Jinping firmly overruled this fearful apprehension and stated that China doesn't believe in any such so-called traps, but if other countries will consistently be looking for one by having miscalculations, then there are chances that one might come up. However, Graham Allison differs from this idea as he based his speculation on the offensive realist tradition that sees power struggle between two leading to war. Allison's understanding gained much attention when the United States in its NSS document referred to China and Russia as revisionist powers and accused China of trying to dislocate America in the Indo-Pacific region to restructure the region in its favor.<sup>19</sup>

Though it true that China with time has started pursuing strict policy options, this is at the same time the result of the United States forcing China to obey US standards and norms. China denies US allegations against it regarding the South China Sea and the call to follow the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. There has been a sense of discontent among Chinese policy makers as they see the current order favoring the United States at the expense of China. To make the order just, many academics believe that Xi Jinping should deviate from the Deng Xiaoping policy of strategic patience toward making it a great power in the international realm.

Along with this, small states that want US presence in the region have also made China aggressive in reaching out its broader goals in the Asia-Pacific region. Adding to the fire is the Taiwan issue. China has maintained a claim over Taiwan since its independence, referring to the One China policy and believing that the 1992 consensus calls for one country two systems. Yet, Taiwan has repeatedly shown its disagreement with the China's claims, and the United States has backed Taiwan in all ways. Importantly, in the meeting of the military commission, CMC, President Xi ordered the People's Liberation Army to be prepared for war.<sup>20</sup> This has fueled tensions at two ends and increased the relevance of the Thucydides Trap thesis by bringing more uncertainties to the Asia-Pacific region.

## What Is Next? Beyond Thucydides Trap to Multipolarity

Taking Thucydides Trap as a discourse for understanding conflict emerging between a rising power and a declining hegemon without considering the context may lead to an incomplete interpretation of the puzzle. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been successful in creating a liberal democratic order, where market forces have made it possible for all states to integrate despite different ideological inclinations. It was believed that nuclear deterrence was a major reason for not having an all-out war between the United States and Soviet Union. If we try to analyze US–China competition from a different lens, then we can see that economy plays a main role in shaping the relationship trajectory of these two great powers.

One should not forget that whatever China has been able to accomplish is largely the result of the stability maintained by the US rules-based order regionally. Moreover, globalization has increased short-term incentives for nonstop cooperation. That is why both states have backed away from the trade war that could have led to a global recession. The Trump administration's perceived move toward isolationism by removing the United States from the TPP, Paris Climate Agreement, and Iran nuclear deal has put the US-led liberal order at risk. Nevertheless, President Xi back in 2017 at the stage of the economic forum expressed his intentions to continue the liberal order.

As he stated, China's consistent reforms and opening of the economy has given much impetus to a free and open economic system. The role of the small power is very important in this regard—an importance which is often neglected by Thucydides Trap. Although these regional states look to the United States as a security guarantor, they are increasingly dependent on China economically and enjoy profitable two-way trade with China. Japan, despite all clashes and disputes, is China's third-largest partner for trade. Their total trade, worth \$317 billion today, is a massive increase from \$1 billion over the past 45 years.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, trade between Australia and China is worth \$251 billion.<sup>22</sup> Allison's bipolar understanding fails to perceive the power distribution of the Asia-Pacific through the Asian lens.

America's declining power and increasing Chinese capabilities do not entirely mean power shifting to another state—rather it shows the increasing relevance of emerging economies of Southeast Asia that in turn signals the rise of Asia and relative decline of the West. Henceforth, the US–China relationship needs to be scrutinized from an Asian Century perspective. A relative shift is seen from developed economies toward emerging economies. As predicted by the *Global Trends*

2030 report, the year 2030 will be marked with massive economic growth whereby China and India will be on lead in Asia.

Moving further, we can look to US and Chinese diplomacy with India as focused toward preserving the order of the region, rather than any sort of total zero-sum scuffle for preeminence. To this end, power maximization in the Asia-Pacific region could lead us toward the understanding of multipolarity in which emerging economic giants such as India, Australia, Indonesia, and those with small economic clout such as Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam can play a major role. So, the multipolarity discourse best explains the changing geopolitical dynamics of the region.

Apart from this, there are multilateral settings such as ASEAN which provide smaller nations a collective voice. Moreover, the United States and China are often seen collaborating with these regional powers on multiple issues related to the environment, terrorism, and disaster management. Another way to analyze this factor is the Obama administration's pivot to Asia, which shows the relevance of small states as the United States started deepening its relations with regional allies such as Australia and Thailand. At the same time, the United States extended its diplomatic rendezvous with the Philippines and Vietnam.

Hence, the Asia-Pacific region must be analyzed in the context of multipolarity rather than sticking to the concept of the Thucydides Trap, which narrows the actual image of the region. President Xi in this regard has put forward what he calls the new major-power relations, which is to be based on peace, mutual benefit, and respect, rather than the traditional great-power rivalry and zero-sum game. However, the United States has not yet been persuaded to give parity to China. Nevertheless, time has made both great powers realize the cost of noncooperation and how to peacefully manage their competing interests as far as Asia-Pacific is concerned.

## **Conclusion**

Changing geopolitical dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region must be analyzed with a regional lens. A strategic narrative to normalize relations and to free both competitors from Thucydides Trap requires thinking beyond power maximization to agreement on a set of implicit and explicit norms. Thucydides Trap paints a disappointing and dystopian outlook for the Asia-Pacific region, which makes it a center of gravity for the power struggle between the United States and China. It also has intensified the danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy as policy makers place the United States and China on a collision course. The emergence of China as a major contender to the United States in the region and abroad has worried the US administration about China's intentions.

Therefore, the United States is taking different moves to counter China's threat to its order. However, analyzing this conflict through the lens of Allison's Thucydides Trap provides only a very narrow understanding of the regional dynamics that ignores the role of small powers. This article argues that we need to look beyond the predominant discourse of bipolarity or Thucydides Trap to discourse on multipolarity and its influence and relation with the former. Multipolarity discourse, unlike the limited bipolar narrative, provides a much broader picture with which to assess the Asia-Pacific region while keeping in view the force of globalization and the role played by small regional powers. 🌐

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