TAMSAAL
ISSN Print: 3007-5939
ISSN Online: 3007-5947
Volume 4, Number 7, 2026, Pages 63 – 73
Journal Home Page
https://tamsaal.pk/index.php/tamsaal/index

The U.S.–China Strategic Rivalry since 2013: Great Power Competition, Technological Contestation, and the Reshaping of the International Order

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	*April*	*18, 2026*
Revised:	*May*	*19, 2026*
Accepted:	*July*	*01, 2026*
Available Online:	*July*	*06, 2026*

Keywords:

United States, China, Strategic Competition, Indo-Pacific, Belt and Road Initiative, Trade War, South China Sea, Taiwan, South Asia, Pakistan.

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DOI: *https://doi.org/10.59075/tamsaal.v4i7.51*

ABSTRACT

Since 2013, U.S. and China have changed from selective engagement to broad strategic competition, in political, economic, military, technological and geopolitical capacities. The study discovers the significant features behind this competition, including China's global rise, including BRI, military modernisation, technological progress and military presence in the region as well as the United States' competitive actions, such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, enhanced security alliance, trade instruments and technological restrictions. The paper also studies vital flashpoints such as the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, cyber security, and the U.S.-China trade war, and their impacts on the security of the region and the world. Given the profound changes in the regional reality between the two powers, China and Pakistan, and between the U.S. and India, there is a particular focus on the impact of this competition in the South Asian region. The study is based on policy documents, academic literature and official reports, and concludes that the U.S.-China rivalry has become the key process in the current international system, affecting global governance, global supply chains, technological innovation and security architecture. The results indicate that the ongoing strategic rivalry will greatly influence the Indo Pacific region's future and will force the regional states to adopt a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy in an increasingly polarized global landscape, especially for Pakistan.

Introduction

In 21st century, the U.S.-China relations have developed one of an essential geopolitical rivalry. Where once rivalry was primarily seen in the context of economic involvement and long-term strategy, it has slowly moved into a full-blown contest between rival political orders in military, economic, technological and supply chain sectors. China is regarded as the U.S has lost its sense of a natural competitor, formulations that characterize its operating space in a comprehensive and certain manner have been changed, and China is the sole player, albeit on a limited list, with the ability to reshape the international order, both in its intent and in its growing capacity (White House 2022). That rivalry has thus turned into a coalition-building development, as well as an institutional rivalry and regional security dynamic across Asia and the Indo-Pacific (Ikenberry, 2021).

Since 2013, the U.S.-China ‘rivalry' has taken a new form and is now a more sophisticated and faster development of competition than ever before. Since the launch in 2013 of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) along with its growing maritime and military power, China has spread its influence throughout Asia, Africa and the rest of the Global South in the area of global infrastructure financing. China's most recent updates have been the U.S. response to its Indo-Pacific strategy, the increased cooperation with allies in the region, and the strategic race as a central organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy. This has created competition in strategic, economic, technological and ideological dimensions, which adds new challenges for regional states to review their alignments, partnerships and foreign policy decisions (The White House, 2022).

The Rise of China as a Global Power

China has cemented its status as a global economic superpower along with expansion of military and international power since 2013. With an increasingly assertive foreign policy, China has challenged the global order established by the US after the Second World War (Ikenberry, 2018; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024) led now by President Xi Jinping. China has been able to establish extensive leverage in both regional and global markets as a result of the rapid growth driven by its manufacturing base, large consumer base, and innovative technology. Later, in 2019, the World Bank labeled China an industrialized world manufacturing powerhouse and second largest economy, further predicting its increasing dominance in research and development, advanced technology manufacturing, artificial intelligence (AI), renewable energy (RE), electric vehicles (EVs) and digital platforms (World Bank & Development Research Center of the State Council 2019).

In the middle of the most obvious marks of China's growing power is the BRI, launched in 2013. The project aimed at spread Chinese influence while promoting economic connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe through structured financing that could reinforce China's role in global trade (World Bank, 2019). According to a World Bank Report, the BRI was proposed as a high-level framework connecting China with Central Asia, South Asia, Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Gulf region through large overland corridors, inspired by maritime trading routes to East Africa and North African coastal cities. (World Bank, 2019) By the early twenty-twenties, China had sunk billions into infrastructure projects and shored up its ties with countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Kenya; for instance, pegs for the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor topped an estimated $62 billion, but overall spending on BRI ballooned to a huge global size (McBride et al. 2023). By financing in these states, China has extended political influence, and as a result, the U.S. is becoming progressively alarmed about China's growing geopolitical footprint (Chatham House, 2021; McBride et al., 2023).

The United States' Response to China's Rise

In recent years, the United States has eyed China's rise with growing trepidation, given how China's ever more expansive economic, military, and technological might has begun to contest the liberal international order the United States has presided over for decades. The US first approached China through a cooperation framework on trade, climate change, security, and global governance. But in the last decade, particularly since 2013, China has been increasingly viewed by the United States not only as an economic partner but also as a strategic opponent and adversary. And this transition was especially evident in US strategic documents, including the 2017 National Security Strategy, which described how China sought to displace American power, influence, and interests and reshape the region to its advantage (White House, 2017).

The United States moved from a strategy articulated by President Barack Obama known as the "Pivot to Asia" or "Rebalance to Asia," which was designed to respond to the rising strategic significance of Asia and, with it, the need for mechanisms to establish norms in pursuing a rules-based regional order. This strategy included increased cooperation with regional partners and allies, greater U.S. diplomatic and military presence in the Indo-Pacific, and support for regional trade agreements (e.g., the Trans-Pacific Partnership [TPP], from which China was excluded) (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). The Obama Administration further pursued its own version of strategic engagement with China in the form of a series of top-level dialogues on trade, cyber security, military issues, climate change, and wider regional security interests, which were shaped by an objective both to compete and cooperate in managing (mostly) the growth of China's influence.

The U.S.–China trade war imposed tariffs on billions of dollars' worth of goods, upending global supply chains and deepening both countries' economic crises. In 2019, the United States designated China as a currency manipulator and blamed it for this official designation (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2019). Along with trade, China's growing capabilities also appeared to be a subject of growing concern in the United States. China has set its sights on 5G telecommunications, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and leading-edge digital infrastructure, and US defenses against tech competition include concerns that China could become the world leader in many of these fields. In view of this, the United States began pulling out all the stops to prevent Chinese tech companies from accessing US markets and technology, with Huawei — one of the world's leading 5G infrastructure providers— a major target.

U.S. officials and analysts have said there were potential "espionage" risks with Chinese Huawei's equipment, which could enable China's government to access information, while Huawei and its founder staunchly denied any allegation that it would spy on behalf of the Chinese state (Reuters, 2019). In summary, by the end of the Trump era, the U.S.-China dynamic had evolved from a state of benign co-operation to a heightened strategic competition, with the competition now pitting China and the United States against each other in the arena of trade, technology, security and the Indo-Pacific.

Military Tensions and Regional Security Concerns

One particular source of great tension between the two sides has been the military side of the U.S–China rivalry, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. The rise of China and its military modernization, especially at sea, has been seen by the United States as a threat to the free-access global order that has underwritten its prosperity. The U.S. Department of Defense has conversant that China remains to modernize the People's Liberation Army (PLA), grow its naval reach, and reinforce its ability to operate across the First Island Chain, the South China Sea, and the broader Indo-Pacific region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). The United States has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to oppose the trend of similarly excessive maritime claims, and to ensure freedom both on the seas and in the skies over international waters in response to China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea. U.S and several regional allies have supposed China's actions to build and militarize artificial islands organized with its sweeping maritime claims as being at balances with international maritime law and a challenge to the prevailing balance of power in the region (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

One further flashpoint in US–China relations has continued to the present day: the Taiwan issue. Taiwan is an inseparable part of the Sacred Territory of China, while China has consistently treated political matters as internal affairs. The Chinese side warned the U.S. not to intervene in its own affairs (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2022). In contrast, the US has preserved its strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan by supplying arms and defensive assistance to the island but not formally recognizing it as an independent state. The U.S is invented to supply Taiwan with defensive objects and services appropriate for its self-defense under the supplies of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), a 1979 U.S. law that also requires the United States to maintain a degree of defense capability sufficient to resist any coercion against Taiwan that would threaten its security or social and economic system (American Institute in Taiwan, 2026). Though the United States has not yet formally given up on strategic ambiguity, Joe Biden said in 2022 that U.S. forces would come to Taiwan's defense if China attacked it, and while the White House subsequently insisted U.S. policy had not changed.

This has strong implications for South Asia too — the escalation of US–China military tensions. Increasing military access and presence in the Indian Ocean region, particularly through China's developing close strategic partnership with Pakistan, led the USA to seek closer defense and security cooperation with India. Since 2013, the strategic coalition between the U.S.-India has massive prospective, with both states concentrating on collaboration in the Indo-Pacific, maritime security, defense technology, interoperability and regional steadiness. In 2016, The U.S officially recognized India as a Major Defense Partner, and official U.S. papers have described defense collaboration with India as a key support of the overall strategic partnership (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2016; U.S. Department of State, 2025). For its part, Chinese–Pakistani military cooperation has reinforced Pakistan's strategic value for Beijing and placed Islamabad front and center in the new great-power competition in South Asia. Consequently, the changing military competition between the US and China has generated a complex regional security landscape in which Pakistan must balance its close historical relationship with China while confronting an increasingly potent US–India strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean through 2030 (Lalwani et al., 2023).

The South China Sea: Strategic Flashpoint

The South China Sea is considered one of the most prominent fields of the U.S-China military competition, where resources are abundant and key maritime passages are located. China has traditionally been hostile in affirming its claims to the past decade's endangered features to solidify its territorial assertions in the South China Sea (SCS). For its part, since 2013 China has combed land and built artificial islands in the Spratly Islands, nearly 3,200 acres of new land, and expanded its facilities in the Paracel Islands; these outposts include radar and communications systems, airstrips, hangars, and other infrastructure enhancing China's capacity to monitor and project power in the region (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2023).

It has also fostered intense friction with other claimant nations, especially Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia, as well as with the US government, which has a vested interest in guaranteeing freedom of navigation and over flight on the high seas. To challenge what it views as extreme maritime claims by China and to reaffirm international law regarding free navigation, the U.S has led Freedom of Navigation Operations in response to Chinese territorial and maritime claims (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

The Law of the Sea Convention provided a common judicial system for maritime rights, but a solution has not yet developed to the more basic question of islands and maritime features sovereignty in the South China Sea. The Philippines' case led to a ruling in 2016 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration that examined Chinese activities in the South China Sea without recognizing China's own legal basis of its historic rights claims within the "nine-dash line", and that found it was an illegitimate process and maintained a position of non-acceptance and non-participation (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). The South China Sea is the location of one-third of all shipping worldwide, and a majority of transoceanic trade between the Pacific and Indian oceans. Freedom of access to this critical maritime channel is a prerequisite for the United States for global trade (China Power Project, 2017).

In this context, the competition between the U.S. and China has also intensified. The U.S wants freedom of steering; and for China, the South China Sea is important to their sovereignty, security and economy. This imbalances of power is one of the most important continuing military tensions between the two authorities, and is having architectural implications for East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific.

The Taiwan Strait: A Potential Flashpoint

Since 2013, before the resolution of conflicts involving Taiwan, the US and China ramped up military moves in region. China has continually augmented its military posture across the Taiwan Strait via persistent military exercises, a more assertive air and naval presence, a process of missile modernization, and increasing pressure on Taiwanese air and maritime space. China continued to modernize the People's Liberation Army, including its naval, missile, air and joint-operation capabilities, pursued with a longstanding focus on Taiwan (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

Finally, the U.S. has hardened its military cooperation with Indo-Pacific allies and partners—particularly Japan and Australia—to enhance deterrence against China and sustain regional stability. Countering these developments has made Chinese warnings about U.S. interference in what Beijing see as a domestic issue and a core sovereignty security interest more acute. Subsequently, the Taiwan issue continues to be among the most dangerous friction points in US–China relations and potential military conflict over Taiwan has become a focus of global attention. Taiwan's defense has also become a key part of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as its general aspirations to maintain an effective balance of power in Asia. Reunification with Taiwan is an intrinsic issue of national identity, not just the ultimate one of national identity, but also of territorial integrity and of regime legitimacy, and, of course, of "national rejuvenation. The ongoing military tensions in the Taiwan Strait are thus less a matter of regional security and more a global one with implications for the stability of East Asia and beyond, for the high seas and international trade, for the credibility of Washington and its allies, and, indeed, for the international order as a whole.

Cyber Security and Technological Warfare

Beyond conventional military-to-military capabilities, cyber security has emerged as a legitimate domain of U.S-China competition. Each country has also engaged in cyber espionage and built up cyber warfare capabilities, hacking one another, stealing data and using technology to further advance their political and military objective. The U.S has, on numerous occasions, accused China of carrying out cyber-attacks against U.S corporations, government agencies and critical infrastructure. Likewise, China has, they assertion, launched cyber operations to decline Chinese political and economic solidity. The technological arms race between the U.S and China extends beyond cyber security, encompassing 5G technology, artificial intelligence and space. China has been heavily investing in the development of 5G networks through companies like Huawei, but the United States is moving to block China from playing a role in providing infrastructure it sees as critical due to national security concerns (Sumbal et al., 2026).

The U.S has similarly raised concerns about China's domination of global communication networks, alleging that China has used its technology to gain access to users' communications and control key data flows. The rapid rise of China in emerging technologies poses a challenge to US technological dominance. U.S. competition in information technology is an economic battle, to be sure, but it also matters because such power translates directly into military capabilities with potential global significance. Both authorities have stern enduring consequences for global security, with military applications, as they capitalize in developing future technologies (Shen, 2016).

Regional Security and South Asia

The US–China rivalry has become an integral part of the regional security dynamics in South Asia, with China strengthening its economic and military relationship with Pakistan, and intensifying its strategic relationship with India. China is increasingly encroaching into India's sphere of influence in terms of defence and economic relations, making India more involved in great power politics. Eighth, the US-India strategic partnership has been utilized much more assertively since approximately 2013 than it had been prior to that point. Washington is now connecting India with its role as not only a significant defense partner, but also a growing facilitator of a free and open Indo-Pacific order as well. This allowed India and the United States to place scientific trust in military logistics cooperation, signing the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement in 2016 and the subsequent institutionalisation of closer defence trade and technology sharing, through the designation of India as a Major Defense Partner (MDP) by the U.S. Department of Defense (2016).

At the same time, later cooperation adjusted toward areas of common interest, including information-sharing, maritime security development, technology sharing and interoperability to reflect US–India defense interests in the Indo-Pacific region more broadly (U.S. Department of

Defense 2024). Given the increased level of military cooperative behavior between India and the United States via agreements like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement—signed in 2016 and designed to promote interoperability between U.S. forces and Indian armed services—and especially through negotiations on the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, this deepening defense relationship with Washington against China adds another dimension to it. The strategic partnership with China provides Pakistan with a counterweight to India's growing military power and improves ties with the United States. Pakistan has been deepening its military-to-military relationship with China in conventional arms cooperation, joint production, naval modernization, and strategic platforms; for instance, the JF-17 fighter was developed as a co-production venture between Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation, while China retains its status as Pakistan's most important defense partner and leading supplier of advanced conventional weapons systems (Pakistan Aeronautical Complex 2026; Lalwani et al. 2023). Advanced and more sophisticated naval platforms also accompanied bilateral defense cooperation, including Hangor-class submarines that represent an evolution in Pakistan's development of more capable maritime warfare systems via Chinese support (Reuters, 2026).

Moreover, historically, China has also aided Pakistan in its missile and nuclear–related development, contributing to a strategic deterrent posture, as documented (although most contemporaneous cooperation is more obvious in conventional weaponry, aircraft, naval systems, and military interoperability) (Paek 2021; Paul 2003). As India further integrates military power with the US through the US–India strategic partnership, this Chinese view provides Pakistan with vital defense support. As a result, the US–China competition has aggravated South Asia's security dilemma by strengthening both parallel strategic alignments, the United States with India and China with Pakistan.

Since 2013, the military and security aspects of the US-China competition have been a key new pillar in this evolving strategic rivalry. Recent developments in military tensions across the South China Sea, as well as between Taiwan and the mainland, coupled with growing signs of escalation risk further afield throughout the broader Indo-Pacific region,, raise chilling questions about an impending war and regional and global stability. As for the cross-border military competition evolving between India and China in the region, the implications are not only challenging for Pakistan but also provide opportunities for it, given that it is at the center of this great-power strategic contest. Pakistan still maintains a strategic partnership with both China and the United States, combined with being on an aggressive path to build its defense capabilities.

Economic Competition: Trade, Technology, and Global Influence

In the 21st century, the economic battle between the U.S.-China has emerged as one of the most significant aspects of competition, where both sides seek to assert their economic rights, advance their technological power and establish a framework for the international economy. Since 2013, this competition has been growing and the American government has grown increasingly concerned about the Chinese government's almost complete control of its economy, which is used to fund industrial subsidies, direct credit to chosen industries, create 'market barriers' and impose conditions on foreign access into its sectors via IP protection and technology transfer. The Section 301 investigation concluded that the Chinese policies on technology transfer, IP and innovation were unfair and unreasonable to United States commercial interests and, with China's state-led model of capitalism, which the U.S. viewed as stifling on fair competition and liberal economic order, China was increasingly falling into the arms of American commercial interests. Meanwhile, China applied U.S. tariffs, export control, investment restrictions and tech authorization to try to slow China's growth and restrict its access to advanced tech.

The economic competition has now spread beyond trade deficits and tariffs to strategic and security related fields (such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, supply-chain security), digital infrastructure, investment screening, and technology standards. For instance, the U. in October 2022.S enacted export restrictions on advanced objects in the field of computing and semiconductors. U.S's sight that economic and technological instruments have become a vital part of national security competition with China. The competition has also been bolstered by the growing China's sway over the global economic system, particularly as a significant backer in many Asian, African & European countries with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), whose expanding bet is one of the most important in Asia, Africa & Europe (World Bank, 2019). Hence, the economic aspect of US–China rivalry is more than just a battle of commercial interests; it's an all-out struggle over leadership at the technological level, control of supply chains, and the global economic governance structure in the decades to come.

The US-China Trade War: A Clash of Economic Models

Since 2013, the U.S.-China trade deficit has been a key point of contention in the U.S.-China economic competition. In 2018, the economic contusion triggered the US-China trade war, impacting the buying power of consumers in the U.S. and China, billions of dollars' worth. As opposed to the presidency of Donald Trump, the U.S alleged unfair trading practices by China such as currency manipulation, technology transfer and IP theft. These accusations led to the introduction of duties on Chinese goods, to which China responded with symmetrical measures on American goods, such as soybeans, cars,, and industrial equipment (Mammadov, 2019).

The two sides clashed on economics as the centerpiece of China's industrial policy, which involved channeling investment into specific high-tech industries, focusing on the growth of China's share of sectors such as robotics, artificial intelligence, aerospace, advanced manufacturing and semiconductors. The U.S. saw the policies as a "covert campaign" by China to control the next generation of technologies, to reduce the need for foreign suppliers, and to leverage the advantages of government action (national subsidies, technology acquisition programs, and favoritism toward domestic companies) as a competitive weapon. It is explicit that this is a concern in the outcome of the U.S. Section 301 investigation, which found that the Chinese government's policies on technology transfer, IP and innovation are unreasonable or unfair, and have an adverse effect on fair competition between U.S. and Chinese companies (USTR, 2018a).

Tensions were also exacerbated by China's rising use of industrial subsidies, measures to prevent foreign ownership of its intellectual property, and Beijing's ability to dominate certain supply chains, as the United States claimed that China was using state-led economic initiatives in ways that distorted global markets while further solidifying the nation's technological and geopolitical dominance. The trade war saw its most strident escalation in 2018 and 2019, with both sides imposing tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars in goods. The action of the United States in June 2018 imposing other tariffs on around $50billion worth of Chinese imports tied to potentially strategic technologies, including items associated with Made in China 2025;

finalizing a second list covering another approximately $200 billion of Chinese imports by September; and heading toward a third wave covering another approximately $300 billion of Chinese imports, shows how quickly the trade conflict between the two sides has escalated (USTR, 2018b, 2018c).

The higher costs of imported goods, adjustments in supply-chain networks, the less availability of some foreign varieties, welfare losses for consumers and firms all bore an economically and statistically significant impact from these tariffs; one prominent economic analysis determined that the bulk of the tariff burden passes through largely to U.S. consumers and importers (Amiti et al., 2019). In January 2020, the United States and China concluded negotiations on a new Phase One trade agreement in which China pledged to buy more U.S. goods and agreed to commitments in areas of intellectual property (IP), technology transfer, agriculture, financial services and exchange-rate practices (USTR, 2020). But the deeper problems sustaining the rivalry, such as forced technology transfer, market access, and industrial subsidies, not to mention China's state-capitalist model itself, went unsolved. The result was further bolstered by USTR's quadrennial review of the Section 301 measures, which found that many of the technology-transfer-related practices that have harmed U.S. commerce remained unabated in China (USTR, 2024).

Thus, the trade war not only damaged U.S.-China relations but also triggered a broader transformation of global markets as both nations moved to wean their respective economies from mutual dependency in key areas. Even as the trade war is one of the most visible aspects of U.S.–China economic rivalry, it is only part of a broader struggle for worldwide economic preeminence, technology leadership, capital control, supply-chain robustness and global order.

Conclusion

The U.S.-China relationship has shifted drastically from being a prickly partnership to a long-term strategic rivalry since 2013. From being just about an economy of interdependence and commerce, it has grown to a multifaceted struggle between two geopolitical, military, technological, cyber and competing visions of the international order. China's growing economic power, military modernization, global projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, and its increased influence on the international arena, have bolstered its influence internationally, while the United States has ramped up its security ties around the globe, including in the Indo Pacific region, implemented the Indo Pacific Strategy, and tightened trade and technology restrictions.

The research shows that strategic mistrust has grown between the two powers and the potential for regional instability has been heightened at key flash points such as the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, cyber, and technology competition. At the same time, the economic aspect of competition, including the trade war and export restrictions, the competition for advanced technologies and global value chains, are clear examples of the importance of the economic dimension in the framework of national security in modern global politics.

The impact of this competition is much larger than is confined to East Asia. The improvement of the U.S.–India strategic partnership and the ongoing growth of China–Pakistan ties have changed the regional security landscape and reinforced already established geopolitical alliances of the region in South Asia. Hence, Pakistan is in a strategic position in this emerging competition, and should carefully tread the path between the two traditional friends China and Pakistan and demonstrate constructive engagement with the USA and other regional partners. A rational, realistic, and economy-oriented external policy will continue to be crucial to ensure Pakistan's national goals in the backdrop of growing great power rivalry.

So, in the end, the U.S.-China rivalry is set to continue to be the main axis of the international system for the foreseeable future. While it is unlikely that direct military conflict will occur, competition in economic, technological, military and diplomatic fields will continue to influence the governance of the world, security in the region and the future balance of power. Diplomatic, strategic restraint and enhanced international institutions will be crucial to minimizing the threat of conflict, while maintaining stability and security across the region and beyond.

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