

Rivalry in the Pacific: Realist Insights into U.S.-China Geopolitical Contest

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Abstract

This article examines the escalating rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific region through the lens of realist theory in international relations. Drawing from both classical and structural realism, the study analyzes the key dynamics driving this competition, including military posturing, economic influence, and strategic alliances. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea and its broader ambitions are juxtaposed with the United States' efforts to maintain its dominant position through containment strategies and the reinforcement of regional alliances such as AUKUS and the Quad. The article explores several potential future scenarios, ranging from heightened militarization and economic decoupling to the risk of conflict over Taiwan. The analysis emphasizes the importance of power politics and the balance of power in shaping the behavior of both great powers, as well as the role of smaller regional actors. Ultimately, the paper concludes that while diplomatic engagement and economic interdependence may provide avenues for managing tensions, the underlying strategic competition between the U.S. and China is unlikely to subside in the near future.

Keywords: Realism, U.S.-China Rivalry, South China Sea, Balance of Power, Pacific Geopolitics, AUKUS, Quad, Taiwan

1. Introduction

The international system, particularly in the 21st century, has been marked by significant shifts in the distribution of power, with the rise of new global actors challenging the status quo. Nowhere is this shift more apparent than in the Pacific region, where the People's Republic of China (PRC) has emerged as a formidable economic and military force, posing a direct challenge to the long-standing dominance of the United States (U.S.). The intensification of strategic competition between these two powers has not only altered the geopolitical landscape of the region but has also reignited debates surrounding the application of realist theories in explaining international relations.

Realism, as one of the foundational theories of international relations, offers a pragmatic framework for understanding global politics. It emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system, where states, operating in an environment devoid of overarching authority, must prioritize their security and power to ensure survival. The central tenets of realism—*anarchy, power politics, and national interest*—are highly applicable to the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry, particularly in the context of the Pacific, where both states are vying for influence, control, and security.

This paper utilizes the realist lens to dissect the growing tensions between the U.S. and China in the Pacific region. By doing so, it seeks to explain the strategic calculations and actions of both states in their quest

to secure national interests, enhance military capabilities, and maintain regional dominance. From territorial disputes in the South China Sea to the contentious issue of Taiwan's sovereignty, the competition between these two powers has far-reaching implications for regional and global stability.

1.1 Background of the U.S.-China Rivalry

The rise of China as a global power is one of the most significant geopolitical developments of the 21st century. In the decades following the end of the Cold War, the U.S. maintained unchallenged hegemony in the Pacific, exerting both economic and military influence. However, China's rapid economic growth—marked by its transition from a developing nation to the world's second-largest economy—has fundamentally altered the balance of power in the region.

Since the early 2000s, China's foreign policy has shifted from the doctrine of "peaceful rise" to a more assertive posture, particularly in its immediate neighborhood. This shift is most evident in Beijing's approach to the South China Sea, where it has aggressively asserted territorial claims, constructed artificial islands, and established military outposts, in direct violation of international law as determined by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. This region, which holds immense strategic and economic importance due to its shipping lanes and natural resources, has become a flashpoint for Sino-American tensions.

The U.S., under successive administrations, has responded to China's rise with a strategy of containment and engagement, seeking to prevent Beijing from dominating the region while simultaneously fostering economic ties. This dual approach has manifested in several key policy initiatives, including the Pivot to Asia strategy introduced by the Obama administration and the more recent creation of the AUKUS alliance in 2021, which aims to strengthen military cooperation between the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Australia to counter Chinese influence.

1.2 The Realist Framework

The realist framework is particularly well-suited to analyze this strategic rivalry. At the heart of realism is the idea that the international system is inherently anarchic, meaning that no central authority exists to regulate the behavior of states. In this context, states are rational actors that prioritize their survival, often through the accumulation of power. Realism posits that conflicts arise not because of ideological differences or misunderstandings but because of the security dilemma—a situation in which one state's efforts to enhance its security prompts a rival state to do the same, creating a cycle of tension and conflict. For classical realists like Hans Morgenthau, international politics is governed by the struggle for power, driven by human nature and the desire for dominance. This struggle is reflected in the behavior of states like the U.S. and China, which seek to expand their spheres of influence and secure their national interests. Morgenthau's theory, articulated in his seminal work *Politics Among Nations* (1948), emphasizes that power, defined as control over resources, territory, and influence, is the key variable in international relations.

Structural realists like Kenneth Waltz offer a slightly different perspective, focusing on the distribution of capabilities within the international system rather than human nature. Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) argues that the structure of the international system—particularly the distribution of power—determines the behavior of states. In a multipolar or bipolar system, states act to maintain the balance of power, as any significant shift could threaten their survival. In the Pacific, the U.S.-China rivalry is a clear example of this balancing act, where both powers are maneuvering to prevent the other from gaining a hegemonic position.

1.3 Purpose and Scope of the Article

This article aims to apply the principles of realism to the ongoing tensions between the U.S. and China in the Pacific region. By focusing on key issues such as territorial disputes, military modernization, and economic influence, the paper seeks to explain the strategic behavior of both states through the realist framework. The article will delve into three key areas:

China's Strategic Assertiveness in the South China Sea and beyond, where Beijing's actions are motivated by its desire to secure vital maritime routes, enhance its military capabilities, and assert its regional dominance.

The U.S. Response, characterized by its policy of containment and its efforts to maintain a balance of power through alliances, military presence, and diplomatic initiatives.

The Implications for Regional Stability, including the potential for conflict over Taiwan, the role of smaller regional powers, and the broader impact of this rivalry on global geopolitics.

Through a realist analysis, this article will demonstrate that the tensions between the U.S. and China are not the result of diplomatic failures or miscommunication but are instead an inevitable outcome of power politics in an anarchic international system. The conclusion will explore potential future scenarios for the U.S.-China rivalry, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balance of power to prevent the outbreak of major conflict.

2. Theoretical Framework: Realism in International Relations

Realism is one of the most enduring and influential schools of thought in the study of international relations. It offers a pragmatic approach to understanding the behavior of states, emphasizing the inherent conflictual nature of international politics. Rooted in the notion that the international system is anarchic—where no central authority exists to enforce laws or resolve disputes—realism posits that states must primarily focus on securing their survival, which often translates into the pursuit of power.

Realism is divided into several strands, with **classical realism** focusing on the nature of human beings and their inherent desire for power, while **structural realism (or neorealism)** emphasizes the anarchic structure of the international system as the driving force behind state behavior. This section explores both approaches and explains how they help to elucidate the rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific region.

2.1 Classical Realism: Power as the Driving Force

Classical realism, as articulated by theorists like **Hans Morgenthau**, centers on the belief that politics, both domestic and international, is governed by the drive for power. In *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau argues that states, like individuals, are driven by an inherent lust for power and dominance. According to this perspective, the behavior of states on the international stage is dictated by their desire to maximize power and secure their national interests. Morgenthau's six principles of political realism highlight this focus on power, which he defines not only in terms of military capabilities but also in terms of influence, control over resources, and economic strength.

The current U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific can be viewed through this lens. China's growing assertiveness, particularly in the **South China Sea**, is a clear example of a state seeking to expand its influence and secure greater control over vital resources and strategic maritime routes. From a classical realist perspective, China's actions are not the result of ideological differences or diplomatic misunderstandings but are instead driven by its desire to challenge the existing order and assert its dominance in the region.

The **Nine-Dash Line**, which represents China's historical claim to much of the South China Sea, is a manifestation of this desire for power. By controlling this vast expanse of water, China would not only secure valuable fishing grounds and undersea resources but would also gain control over one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, giving it significant economic leverage. The militarization of artificial islands in the region, which has been condemned by the international community, reflects China's willingness to use military power to secure its national interests, even in the face of opposition.

For classical realists, this behavior is not surprising. Morgenthau's assertion that "the desire for power is rooted in the very nature of man" explains why states, like China, often resort to aggressive measures when their interests are at stake. The U.S. response, which includes increased military patrols and diplomatic efforts to counterbalance China's influence, is similarly driven by its desire to maintain its status as the dominant power in the Pacific. Both countries are acting rationally according to their perceived national interests, illustrating Morgenthau's point that "international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power."

2.2 Structural Realism: Anarchy and the Balance of Power

While classical realism emphasizes human nature as the root cause of state behavior, **structural realism (neorealism)**, developed by **Kenneth Waltz**, shifts the focus to the structure of the international system itself. In his seminal work *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Waltz argues that the international system is inherently anarchic, meaning that there is no overarching authority capable of enforcing rules or ensuring security. In such a system, states are compelled to act in ways that ensure their survival, which often leads them to seek relative gains in power compared to other states.

Waltz's structural realism highlights the concept of the **security dilemma**, where the actions taken by one state to increase its security—such as building up its military—are perceived as a threat by other states, prompting them to do the same. This creates a cycle of tension and arms races, which can eventually lead to conflict. In the Pacific region, the U.S. and China are currently locked in such a security dilemma. China's rapid military modernization, including the expansion of its navy and the development of anti-ship ballistic missiles, has been interpreted by the U.S. and its allies as a direct challenge to their security. The U.S. has responded by strengthening its alliances in the region, particularly with Japan, Australia, and South Korea, and increasing its military presence in the South China Sea. The **AUKUS security pact** a trilateral defense agreement between Australia, the U.K., and the U.S. is one of the clearest examples of this balancing strategy. The pact is designed to enhance Australia's defense capabilities, particularly through the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, allowing it to play a more significant role in countering China's influence in the region.

From a structural realist perspective, these actions are entirely predictable. In an anarchic system, states must prioritize their security, and they do so by balancing against rising powers. As China's economic and military power grows, it naturally seeks to assert itself in the Pacific, which prompts the U.S. to engage in balancing behavior to prevent China from gaining regional hegemony. Waltz argues that this balancing behavior is a necessary feature of international politics, as no state can afford to allow a rival power to dominate a region that is critical to its own security and economic interests.

2.3 The Balance of Power: A Key Concept in Realism

One of the most important concepts in both classical and structural realism is the **balance of power**. Realists argue that stability in the international system is maintained through a balance of power, where no single state or coalition of states is allowed to dominate. When the balance of power is disrupted, as it has been with the rise of China, tensions escalate, and the potential for conflict increases.

In the Pacific region, the balance of power has shifted dramatically over the past two decades. Once dominated by the U.S., the region is now contested by China, which has rapidly expanded its military capabilities and economic influence. The **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, China's massive infrastructure investment project, has further increased Beijing's leverage over smaller regional states, many of which are now economically dependent on Chinese investments. This shift in power has prompted the U.S. to adopt a more aggressive posture in the region, including expanding military exercises with its allies and increasing diplomatic pressure on China.

According to realism, this balancing behavior is a natural response to the changing distribution of power. The U.S. cannot afford to allow China to dominate the Pacific, as doing so would threaten its own security and economic interests. Similarly, China views U.S. military presence in the region as a direct threat to its own national security, particularly as Washington has forged closer ties with Taiwan, which Beijing considers a breakaway province.

This ongoing balancing act between the U.S. and China underscores one of the core principles of realism: **conflict is inevitable in an anarchic system where states are driven by the desire to secure their own survival and maximize their power**. While diplomacy and economic interdependence may temporarily mitigate tensions, the underlying structural dynamics of the international system make it unlikely that the U.S.-China rivalry will be resolved without significant geopolitical realignments.

2.4 Implications for U.S.-China Relations in the Pacific

The realist framework provides a clear explanation for the strategic behavior of both the U.S. and China in the Pacific. As China continues to rise and assert its influence, the U.S. is likely to double down on its balancing efforts, further strengthening its alliances in the region and increasing its military presence. This dynamic is likely to persist for the foreseeable future, as both states seek to avoid being placed in a position of strategic vulnerability.

Realism also suggests that smaller states in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, and the members of **ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)**, will play a crucial role in maintaining the balance of power. These states, caught between two great powers, will seek to align themselves with the side that offers the greatest security guarantees, further complicating the strategic landscape.

In conclusion, realism, both classical and structural, offers a robust theoretical framework for understanding the escalating tensions between the U.S. and China in the Pacific. By focusing on the concepts of power, security, and the balance of power, realism helps to explain why these two states are locked in a strategic rivalry that shows no signs of abating.

3. Case Study: U.S.-China Relations in the Pacific

The U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific region has become one of the defining geopolitical conflicts of the 21st century. This competition manifests itself in multiple arenas, including military posturing, economic influence, and diplomatic engagement, particularly in areas of strategic importance such as the South China Sea and Taiwan. This section applies the realist framework to analyze key developments in the Pacific, emphasizing how power dynamics and national interests drive the actions of both states. By examining China's strategic assertiveness and the U.S.'s efforts to maintain its dominant position in the region, this section highlights the cyclical nature of power politics and the potential for escalation.

3.1 China's Strategic Assertiveness

Over the past two decades, China has transitioned from a cautious international actor to an assertive global power, particularly in its immediate neighborhood. Nowhere is this transformation more evident than in

the **South China Sea**, where Beijing has pursued an aggressive policy of territorial claims and militarization. The South China Sea is of immense strategic importance, not only for its rich natural resources oil, gas, and fisheries but also because it serves as a vital maritime trade route through which an estimated \$3.4 trillion of global trade passes annually [1].

From a **realist perspective**, China's actions in the South China Sea reflect its desire to secure greater power and control over a region that is critical to its national interests. By asserting control over this area, China aims to safeguard its economic and security interests while simultaneously challenging the U.S.'s dominance in the Pacific. Classical realism, with its focus on the inherent drive for power, provides a clear explanation for China's behavior. Beijing's desire to control key shipping lanes and exploit undersea resources fits Morgenthau's assertion that states seek power in various forms economic, military, and territorial when their security is at stake [2].

The **Nine-Dash Line** a demarcation line used by China to assert its historical claims over the South China Sea illustrates Beijing's determination to expand its influence. Despite the 2016 ruling by the **Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA)**, which invalidated China's territorial claims under the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**, Beijing has continued to build and militarize artificial islands in the area [3]. China's rejection of the PCA ruling underscores the realist notion that international law is often subordinate to the pursuit of national interests and power. In the anarchic international system, where no authority exists to enforce such rulings, China's disregard for international law can be interpreted as a rational response aimed at enhancing its power position.

Moreover, China's actions in the South China Sea are part of a broader strategy to project military power in the region. The development of **artificial islands**, equipped with airstrips, radar systems, and missile defense capabilities, demonstrates Beijing's intention to establish a forward-deployed military presence. This militarization not only provides China with a strategic foothold in the region but also allows it to challenge U.S. naval dominance. In the realist tradition, military power is an essential component of national security, and China's buildup in the South China Sea reflects its efforts to secure both defensive and offensive capabilities in a critical geopolitical theater [4].

3.2 The U.S. Response: Containment and Alliances

In response to China's growing assertiveness, the United States has adopted a strategy of **containment**, seeking to prevent Beijing from gaining regional hegemony. The U.S. has long viewed the Pacific as a critical area of strategic importance, and any attempt by China to challenge its dominance is seen as a direct threat to its national interests. To counterbalance China's rise, the U.S. has deepened its military alliances, strengthened its diplomatic presence, and increased its military operations in the region.

The realist concept of the **balance of power** is central to understanding the U.S. response. As China seeks to assert its influence, the U.S. has engaged in **balancing behavior** by reinforcing its security commitments to key allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The U.S. military presence in these countries, along with its **freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)** in the South China Sea, serves as a deterrent to Chinese aggression. These FONOPs, which challenge China's territorial claims by sailing U.S. naval vessels through disputed waters, are a clear demonstration of American resolve to maintain the status quo and ensure the freedom of international waters [5].

The formation of the **AUKUS pact** in 2021 marks a significant escalation in the U.S.'s efforts to contain China's influence. This trilateral security agreement between the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Australia focuses on strengthening Australia's defense capabilities, particularly through the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. From a **structural realist** perspective, AUKUS represents a classic example of

balancing behavior in an anarchic international system. The U.S. and its allies are working to prevent a revisionist power (China) from altering the balance of power in the Pacific by ensuring that their own military capabilities remain superior [6].

In addition to military measures, the U.S. has sought to counter China's growing economic influence in the region. China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, which involves massive infrastructure investments across the Indo-Pacific, has extended Beijing's economic reach and increased its leverage over smaller states. In response, the U.S. has promoted alternative economic initiatives, such as the **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)**, aimed at fostering economic cooperation and reducing dependence on China's BRI projects [7]. This reflects the realist emphasis on the economic dimensions of power, as states seek not only to enhance their military capabilities but also to control economic resources and trade routes.

3.3 Taiwan: The Flashpoint of Great Power Rivalry

One of the most contentious and potentially dangerous aspects of the U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific is the issue of **Taiwan**. Beijing considers Taiwan a breakaway province and has vowed to reunify it with the mainland, by force if necessary. The U.S., while not officially recognizing Taiwan as an independent state, has long provided the island with military aid and maintains a policy of **strategic ambiguity** supporting Taiwan's self-defense without explicitly committing to its defense in the event of a Chinese invasion [8]. From a realist perspective, Taiwan is a critical flashpoint in the broader U.S.-China rivalry because of its strategic location and its symbolic importance as a marker of U.S. commitment to its allies. Taiwan lies at the heart of the **First Island Chain**, a series of archipelagos that serve as a natural barrier to Chinese naval expansion. Control over Taiwan would provide China with a strategic base from which to project power into the Western Pacific, while its loss would significantly weaken U.S. influence in the region [9].

The **Thucydides Trap**, a concept popularized by political scientist **Graham Allison**, suggests that conflict is likely when a rising power threatens to displace an established power. In the case of U.S.-China relations, the Taiwan issue represents a potential trigger for conflict, as both powers view control over the island as critical to their strategic interests. From a realist standpoint, the Taiwan Strait is not only a territorial dispute but also a contest for power and influence in the broader Pacific region. The **security dilemma** is particularly acute in this context, as China's efforts to modernize its military and prepare for a potential invasion of Taiwan have prompted the U.S. to increase its own military presence in the region, further escalating tensions [10].

3.4 The Implications for Regional Stability

The U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific has significant implications for regional stability. As both powers engage in power politics, smaller states in the region are increasingly caught in the middle. Countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea but are also economically dependent on trade with Beijing. This creates a complex dynamic, where regional actors must balance their economic ties with China against their security concerns and alliances with the U.S.

From a realist perspective, these smaller states are acting rationally by aligning themselves with the side that offers the greatest security guarantees. **ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)**, the regional organization that includes many of these countries, has struggled to form a unified stance on the South China Sea dispute due to the divergent interests of its members. Some states, such as Vietnam, have welcomed U.S. military support, while others, like Cambodia, have moved closer to China [11].

The **balance of power** in the Pacific is further complicated by the presence of other major actors, such as Japan and India, which have their own strategic interests in the region. Both countries have increased their

defense spending and deepened security cooperation with the U.S. in response to China's rise. The formation of the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)**, which includes the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, is a clear indication of the growing regional efforts to counterbalance China's influence. The Quad's emphasis on promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific" reflects the realist belief that alliances are essential for maintaining stability in a multipolar world [12].

In conclusion, the U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific can be best understood through the lens of realism, which emphasizes the importance of power, national interest, and the balance of power in shaping state behavior. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea and Taiwan, coupled with the U.S.'s efforts to contain Beijing through military alliances and economic initiatives, reflect the fundamental dynamics of power politics in an anarchic international system. As both powers continue to compete for influence, the potential for conflict remains high, particularly in areas of strategic importance like Taiwan. The actions of smaller regional actors, caught between these two great powers, further complicate the balance of power in the Pacific, highlighting the intricate and often precarious nature of international relations in this volatile region.

4. Power Politics and the Balance of Power in the Pacific

Power politics, a fundamental concept in realist theory, refers to the practice of states using power whether military, economic, or diplomatic to achieve their national objectives and secure their position in the international system. The U.S. China rivalry in the Pacific provides a textbook example of power politics at play, where both nations engage in strategic maneuvers to balance each other's influence and maintain their respective spheres of control. In an anarchic international system, where no central authority exists to regulate behavior, states must rely on their own resources and alliances to safeguard their interests.

The Pacific region has become a focal point of power politics due to its strategic importance in terms of military positioning, economic influence, and control over vital maritime routes. This section analyzes how both the U.S. and China are utilizing power politics to assert their dominance in the region and how the concept of **balance of power** is shaping the dynamics of this rivalry.

4.1 Economic and Military Balancing

In the realist framework, the balance of power is a core principle that states employ to prevent any single actor from achieving overwhelming dominance. As China rises both economically and militarily, the United States and its allies have sought to maintain a balance by reinforcing their own capabilities and forging stronger regional alliances. This dynamic balancing act is particularly evident in the realms of military power and economic influence.

4.1.1 Military Balancing

China's military expansion has been a major concern for the U.S. and its allies, particularly as Beijing continues to modernize its armed forces. China's **People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)** has grown rapidly in both size and sophistication, becoming the world's largest navy by the number of ships. Beijing has focused on developing **anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)** capabilities, which are designed to deter foreign military forces primarily the U.S. Navy from operating freely in key areas such as the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait [1]. These capabilities include advanced missile systems, submarines, and cyber warfare units, all aimed at restricting U.S. military access to China's near seas.

In response, the U.S. has strengthened its military presence in the Pacific, conducting **freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)** and deploying strategic assets such as aircraft carriers and missile defense systems. The U.S. has also increased the frequency of joint military exercises with its regional

allies, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia. These exercises, such as the **RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) drills**, serve not only as a show of force but also as a means of enhancing interoperability among U.S. allies in the event of a conflict with China [2].

The establishment of the **AUKUS pact** in 2021, which facilitates the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia, marks a significant shift in the regional military balance. The acquisition of these submarines will allow Australia to project power further into the Indo-Pacific and contribute to the broader strategy of containing China's influence. From a realist perspective, this move reflects the U.S. and its allies' recognition of the need to balance China's growing military capabilities in order to maintain the status quo in the Pacific [3].

4.1.2 Economic Balancing

While military balancing is a visible and immediate aspect of power politics, economic balancing is equally critical, especially in the interconnected world of the 21st century. China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, which involves massive investments in infrastructure projects across Asia, Africa, and beyond, has significantly expanded Beijing's economic footprint. Through the BRI, China has sought to build economic dependencies with smaller nations, providing them with much-needed investment in exchange for political and strategic alignment [4].

In response, the United States has promoted alternative economic initiatives aimed at countering China's growing influence. The **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)**, launched in 2022, represents Washington's attempt to create a regional economic architecture that excludes China while promoting trade, investment, and infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific. Although still in its early stages, the IPEF is designed to provide a viable alternative to the BRI, ensuring that regional states have access to economic resources without becoming overly dependent on Beijing [5].

The U.S. has also deepened its economic ties with key allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia through bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. In doing so, Washington seeks to create a regional economic environment that is less susceptible to Chinese coercion and more aligned with U.S. interests. From a realist perspective, these economic strategies are essential for maintaining the balance of power, as economic influence is a key determinant of state power in the international system.

4.2 Regional Actors and Their Role in the Balance of Power

While the U.S. and China are the primary actors in the Pacific, the role of regional powers such as Japan, India, Australia, and the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** cannot be overlooked. These states play a crucial role in shaping the balance of power in the region, as they must navigate the competing interests of the two great powers while pursuing their own national objectives.

4.2.1 Japan's Strategic Positioning

Japan, as one of the most powerful military and economic actors in the Pacific, plays a critical role in the U.S.'s balancing strategy against China. Since the end of World War II, Japan has maintained a close security alliance with the U.S., hosting significant American military bases and contributing to regional stability through its defense capabilities. However, as China's military power has grown, Japan has increasingly taken steps to enhance its own defense posture, including a significant increase in defense spending and the revision of its pacifist constitution to allow for a more proactive military role [6].

In recent years, Japan has expanded its security partnerships beyond the U.S., forming closer defense ties with countries like Australia and India. These trilateral and quadrilateral security arrangements, such as the **Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)**, are designed to counterbalance China's influence by

promoting a “free and open Indo-Pacific” [7]. From a realist perspective, Japan’s strategic positioning is driven by its desire to balance China’s rise while ensuring that it remains aligned with the U.S. security umbrella.

4.2.2 India’s Role in the Indo-Pacific

India has emerged as a key player in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the context of balancing China’s influence. While India traditionally maintained a policy of non-alignment during the Cold War, its strategic priorities have shifted in response to China’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean and along their shared border in the Himalayas. India’s participation in the Quad reflects its growing alignment with the U.S. and its partners in countering China’s influence in the broader Indo-Pacific region [8].

India’s strategy, known as **Act East**, aims to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asian nations and build closer security and economic partnerships in the Pacific. By engaging in joint military exercises with the U.S., Japan, and Australia, India contributes to the broader balancing effort while simultaneously enhancing its own strategic autonomy. Realism provides a clear explanation for India’s actions: as China grows more assertive, India seeks to balance this power by aligning itself with like-minded states that share its concerns about Beijing’s rise.

4.2.3 ASEAN and the South China Sea

The **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** occupies a complex position in the U.S.-China rivalry. Many ASEAN member states, including the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, have direct territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. However, these countries also maintain significant economic ties with Beijing, making it difficult for them to take a unified stance against China’s actions.

ASEAN’s ability to influence the balance of power in the Pacific is limited by its internal divisions and the differing strategic interests of its members. Some states, such as Cambodia and Laos, have moved closer to China due to economic dependencies, while others, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, have sought greater security cooperation with the U.S. to counterbalance China’s maritime claims [9]. This fragmented approach weakens ASEAN’s ability to act as a cohesive counterbalance to China, highlighting the difficulties smaller states face in navigating great power politics.

Nevertheless, ASEAN remains an important actor in the regional balance of power, as its members can influence the strategic calculus of both the U.S. and China. The U.S. has sought to strengthen its ties with ASEAN through diplomatic engagement and economic initiatives, while China has used its economic leverage to secure the support of key ASEAN members. From a realist perspective, ASEAN’s actions are shaped by its members’ desire to balance the competing pressures of economic dependence on China and security concerns about Chinese aggression.

4.3 The Role of Alliances in Power Politics

Alliances are a critical component of power politics, allowing states to pool their resources and capabilities in order to balance against rising threats. The U.S.’s network of alliances in the Pacific, particularly its **mutual defense treaties** with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, plays a central role in maintaining the balance of power in the region. These alliances serve not only as a deterrent to Chinese aggression but also as a means of projecting U.S. power and influence across the Pacific.

The formation of the Quad and the AUKUS pact represent significant developments in the U.S.’s alliance structure, signaling a shift toward more proactive efforts to contain China’s rise. The Quad, in particular, emphasizes the importance of multilateral cooperation in maintaining a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” a

concept that aligns with realist notions of balancing and alliance-building as means of preserving stability in an anarchic international system [10].

China, for its part, has sought to build its own network of alliances and partnerships, although it has struggled to form formal defense pacts similar to those of the U.S. Instead, China has focused on building economic and strategic partnerships with countries that share its interests, such as Russia, Pakistan, and North Korea. These partnerships, while not as formalized as the U.S.'s alliances, still serve to enhance China's power position and challenge U.S. influence in key regions [11].

In conclusion, the U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific is fundamentally shaped by the dynamics of power politics and the balance of power. As both states seek to assert their dominance in the region, they engage in strategic maneuvers that include military posturing, economic competition, and the formation of alliances. Regional actors such as Japan, India, and ASEAN play a critical role in this balancing act, as they navigate the competing pressures of aligning with either the U.S. or China.

From a realist perspective, the balance of power in the Pacific is likely to remain fluid, with both the U.S. and China continually adjusting their strategies to prevent the other from achieving a position of hegemony. Alliances, military capabilities, and economic influence will continue to be the primary tools through which these great powers pursue their national interests, ensuring that the Pacific remains a central arena for power politics in the years to come.

5. The Future of U.S.-China Relations in the Pacific

As the U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific continues to evolve, it raises critical questions about the future of international relations in the region and the broader global order. Will the Pacific region witness increased militarization and the possibility of conflict, or can diplomatic engagements prevent the escalation of tensions? From a realist perspective, which emphasizes the importance of power, security, and self-interest, the answer largely depends on how each state continues to pursue its national objectives and how the balance of power shifts over time.

This section outlines several potential future scenarios for U.S.-China relations in the Pacific, focusing on the long-term implications for regional stability, the prospects for cooperation, and the ever-present risk of conflict.

5.1 Scenario One: Escalation and Militarization

One possible future scenario for U.S.-China relations in the Pacific is a continued **escalation of military posturing** and the further militarization of the region. This scenario is underpinned by the realist notion that states, driven by the need for security, engage in arms races to ensure that they are not vulnerable to potential adversaries. As China continues to expand its military capabilities, including its **People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)** and **anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)** systems, the U.S. is likely to respond with further military deployments, increased military aid to allies, and expanded military exercises [1].

From a realist perspective, this scenario is both likely and dangerous, as it could lead to a **security dilemma**. As both the U.S. and China build up their military forces, each side perceives the other's actions as a threat, prompting further arms buildups and heightening the risk of miscalculation. For example, continued Chinese militarization of the **South China Sea** and the Taiwan Strait could provoke a more robust U.S. military presence in the region, increasing the chances of an accidental confrontation between naval forces [2].

In this scenario, smaller regional actors, particularly those involved in territorial disputes with China, would likely increase their defense spending and align more closely with the U.S. and its allies. Countries such as Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, concerned about Chinese aggression, may seek greater security guarantees from the U.S., further fueling the arms race in the Pacific. This would not only intensify the militarization of the region but could also increase the risk of proxy conflicts or skirmishes, as smaller states act more assertively under the protection of the U.S. security umbrella [3].

5.2 Scenario Two: Diplomatic Engagement and Regional Cooperation

A more optimistic scenario involves **diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation** between the U.S. and China, leading to a stabilization of their rivalry and the establishment of mechanisms to manage their competition. This scenario, though less likely from a realist perspective, is still possible if both powers recognize that continued escalation could lead to devastating conflict.

In this scenario, diplomatic efforts whether through **bilateral summits**, multilateral institutions like **ASEAN**, or even informal channels could help to de-escalate tensions in key areas such as the South China Sea and Taiwan. For instance, the establishment of a **code of conduct** in the South China Sea, which has been discussed for years within ASEAN, could help prevent military incidents and provide a framework for resolving disputes peacefully [4].

From a realist standpoint, diplomacy would not eliminate the underlying competition between the U.S. and China, but it could **manage** it by setting boundaries and creating norms for behavior. Diplomatic engagements might also lead to limited cooperation in areas where both powers share interests, such as combating climate change, countering terrorism, or managing economic crises. However, such cooperation would likely be tactical and short-term, as each state would continue to prioritize its own national interests over long-term collaboration [5].

This scenario would also involve greater regional cooperation through institutions like **ASEAN** and multilateral agreements. Smaller states in the Pacific, recognizing the risks of being caught between two great powers, might push for more diplomatic engagement and promote **confidence-building measures** to reduce the likelihood of conflict. However, the effectiveness of such efforts would depend on the willingness of both the U.S. and China to engage constructively, which realism suggests may be limited by their competing security and power interests.

5.3 Scenario Three: Economic Interdependence and Containment of Conflict

Another possible future scenario is that the **economic interdependence** between the U.S. and China could act as a restraining factor, preventing their rivalry from escalating into open conflict. Despite the intensification of strategic competition, the U.S. and China remain economically intertwined, with trade, investment, and global supply chains creating mutual dependencies. This economic relationship, while strained by trade disputes and tariff wars, continues to generate significant economic benefits for both states, which may incentivize both sides to contain their rivalry within certain bounds [6].

This scenario is consistent with realist theories of **economic power** as a key component of state behavior. While the U.S. and China may continue to compete for economic dominance, particularly in emerging technologies and global markets, both states could recognize that outright conflict would severely damage their economic interests. For example, a conflict over Taiwan would likely disrupt global trade and severely impact both economies, leading to widespread economic instability [7].

In this scenario, the U.S. might continue to pursue a policy of **containment** toward China, using economic tools such as tariffs, sanctions, and trade agreements to limit China's influence while avoiding direct military confrontation. At the same time, China could seek to expand its **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

and other economic projects to enhance its global economic influence without provoking a full-scale conflict with the U.S. [8].

Smaller regional actors would likely continue to navigate between the two powers, seeking to maximize their economic gains while avoiding taking sides in the strategic competition. Countries like Vietnam and Malaysia, which have strong economic ties with both the U.S. and China, may prioritize their economic relationships over security concerns, opting for a policy of **strategic hedging** to maintain good relations with both sides [9].

5.4 Scenario Four: Conflict over Taiwan

A fourth and potentially catastrophic scenario involves a **conflict over Taiwan**, which remains the most significant flashpoint in U.S.-China relations. From a realist perspective, Taiwan is a critical piece in the broader balance of power in the Pacific, and control over the island would have far-reaching implications for both the U.S. and China. Beijing views Taiwan as an integral part of its territory and has repeatedly stated its intention to reunify the island with the mainland, by force if necessary.

The U.S., while not officially recognizing Taiwan as an independent state, maintains a policy of **strategic ambiguity** under the **Taiwan Relations Act**, providing the island with military aid and pledging to assist in its self-defense. Should China attempt to invade Taiwan, the U.S. would likely intervene, leading to a direct military confrontation between the two great powers [10].

This scenario represents the most dangerous outcome of the U.S.-China rivalry. A conflict over Taiwan could quickly escalate into a broader regional war, involving U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, as well as other regional actors. The **Thucydides Trap**, which suggests that war is likely when a rising power threatens to displace an established power, is highly relevant in this context, as China's attempt to change the status quo in Taiwan would be perceived as a direct challenge to U.S. dominance in the Pacific [11].

From a realist standpoint, the risk of conflict over Taiwan is driven by both **structural factors** (the anarchic nature of the international system) and **security concerns** (China's desire to prevent Taiwan from becoming a permanent U.S. ally and the U.S.'s interest in maintaining its strategic position in the region). While both the U.S. and China have strong incentives to avoid such a conflict, the realist emphasis on power and survival suggests that, if either side perceives its national interests to be fundamentally threatened, war could become unavoidable [12].

5.5 Managing the Future: The Role of Deterrence and Diplomacy

Regardless of which scenario unfolds, managing the future of U.S.-China relations in the Pacific will require a delicate balance of **deterrence and diplomacy**. From a realist perspective, deterrence remains a critical tool for preventing conflict, particularly in the context of nuclear-armed states. The U.S. and China must both recognize the high stakes involved in their rivalry, and the potential for escalation must be carefully managed through **military deterrence**, strategic signaling, and clear communication to avoid miscalculation.

At the same time, **diplomatic engagement** will be essential in preventing the worst-case scenarios. While realism often emphasizes conflict and competition, diplomacy can provide a mechanism for managing these rivalries and reducing the risk of war. The U.S. and China, along with regional actors, should continue to engage in multilateral forums such as ASEAN, the **East Asia Summit (EAS)**, and the **Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)** to address common challenges and create channels for dialogue [13].

Ultimately, the future of U.S.-China relations in the Pacific will depend on how both states navigate their strategic competition. The realist framework suggests that conflict is not inevitable, but the potential for escalation will remain high as long as both powers prioritize their national interests and security concerns over long-term cooperation.

The future of U.S.-China relations in the Pacific will be shaped by a complex interplay of power, security, and economic interests. From a realist perspective, the rivalry between these two great powers is unlikely to dissipate, and the potential for conflict remains a constant concern. Whether through continued militarization, economic competition, or diplomatic engagement, the actions of both the U.S. and China will determine the balance of power in the Pacific for years to come. The role of smaller regional actors, economic interdependence, and strategic alliances will also play a critical part in shaping the future trajectory of this rivalry. As both powers seek to assert their dominance, the Pacific will remain a central arena for power politics in the 21st century.

6. Conclusion

The rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific region is a defining feature of contemporary global politics. Through the lens of realist theory, it becomes evident that this competition is driven by fundamental dynamics of power, security, and national interest that are deeply embedded in the anarchic structure of the international system. As China rises to challenge the long-standing dominance of the United States in the Pacific, both powers are engaging in a strategic contest to secure their influence, manage their security concerns, and achieve relative gains in power.

This paper has explored the U.S.-China rivalry through a realist framework, applying key concepts such as **classical realism**, **structural realism**, and the **balance of power** to analyze the behavior of both states. From China's assertive actions in the South China Sea to the U.S.'s containment strategies, including the formation of new military alliances like **AUKUS** and the deepening of ties with **Japan**, **Australia**, and **India**, it is clear that both powers are seeking to maintain or expand their influence in a region of critical geopolitical importance.

6.1 Key Insights from the Analysis

- **China's Strategic Assertiveness:** China's militarization of the South China Sea, its growing naval capabilities, and its pursuit of regional hegemony are clear examples of a rising power seeking to secure its strategic interests. These actions reflect classical realist principles that emphasize the inherent drive for power and the role of military strength in securing national objectives. China's ambitions are not limited to territorial expansion but also involve the assertion of economic influence through the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, which has expanded Beijing's reach across the Indo-Pacific.
- **The U.S. Response:** The United States, as the established hegemon in the Pacific, has responded to China's rise through a combination of **military deterrence**, **economic containment**, and **alliances**. By enhancing its military presence in the region, conducting freedom of navigation operations, and fostering partnerships with regional actors, the U.S. aims to maintain a balance of power that prevents China from achieving dominance. The realist emphasis on alliances is particularly relevant here, as the U.S. relies on its relationships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other partners to reinforce its strategic position in the Pacific.
- **The Role of Regional Actors:** Smaller regional actors, such as the members of **ASEAN**, **India**, and **Japan**, play a crucial role in the balance of power. These states, while navigating the pressures of

aligning with either the U.S. or China, seek to maximize their security and economic benefits. The **Quad** (comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia) exemplifies the role of regional cooperation in balancing China's influence, while ASEAN's fragmented approach reflects the challenges of maintaining a unified stance in the face of economic dependencies on China.

The future of U.S.-China relations in the Pacific will continue to be shaped by the dynamics of power politics and the balance of power. Several potential scenarios—ranging from **continued militarization** and **diplomatic engagement** to **economic containment** and the **risk of conflict over Taiwan**—highlight the uncertainty of this rivalry. While diplomatic efforts and economic interdependence could provide mechanisms to manage tensions, the underlying competition for power and influence is unlikely to dissipate in the near future.

Realism, as a theoretical framework, offers valuable insights into the likely trajectory of U.S.-China relations. It suggests that the actions of both states will remain guided by the pursuit of national interests, particularly in securing their strategic positions in the Pacific. The **security dilemma** where actions taken by one state to enhance its security are perceived as threatening by the other will likely persist, as both the U.S. and China engage in military and economic maneuvers to prevent the other from gaining a decisive advantage.

The U.S.-China rivalry in the Pacific region is emblematic of the broader power shifts occurring in the international system. As China continues to rise, challenging the status quo, and the U.S. works to maintain its hegemonic position, the Pacific will remain a central arena for geopolitical competition. Whether through military posturing, economic engagement, or alliances, both states will continue to assert their influence, shaping the balance of power for decades to come.

From a realist perspective, conflict is not inevitable, but the potential for escalation remains high. **Managing the future** of U.S.-China relations will require a careful balance of deterrence and diplomacy, where both powers recognize the risks of confrontation while seeking to maximize their strategic advantages. In the end, the Pacific region will continue to be defined by the constant interplay of power politics, where stability is maintained only through the delicate balance of power between competing great powers.

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