International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (IJTSRD)
Volume 10 Issue 5, Sep-Oct 2026 Available Online: www.ijtsrd.com e-ISSN: 2456 – 6470

Not War, but Fear: China's Rise and the Regional Dynamics of Thucydides's Trap

Dr. Vishnu Prakash Mangu

Associate Professor of Public Administration, Govt. College (A), Ananthapuramu, Andhra Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

China's rise has become the central geopolitical development of the twenty-first century and has revived debates surrounding Thucydides's Trap. Most scholarship examines whether the growing rivalry between China and the United States will culminate in major-power war. This article argues that China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap in the classical sense of precipitating direct military conflict with the United States. Instead, China's economic expansion, military modernisation, maritime assertiveness, and technological ambitions have generated the trap's underlying dynamics by producing strategic fear among neighbouring states, encouraging balancing coalitions, and promoting widespread strategic hedging across the Indo-Pacific region. The study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design based on academic literature, policy reports, defence analyses, and geopolitical case studies. It examines developments surrounding Taiwan, the South China Sea, the India-China border, QUAD, AUKUS, and ASEAN security behaviour. The findings show that regional states increasingly pursue dual-track strategies that combine economic engagement with China and enhanced security cooperation with other major powers. The article concludes that Thucydides's Trap remains useful for explaining the behavioural consequences of China's rise, particularly fear and balancing, but is insufficient as a deterministic theory of inevitable war. Contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics is better understood as a condition of competitive coexistence shaped by economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, technological rivalry, and strategic hedging. The future of regional stability will therefore depend less on preventing China's rise than on managing the security dilemma it has created.

How to cite this paper: Dr. Vishnu Prakash Mangu "Not War, but Fear: China's Rise and the Regional Dynamics of Thucydides's Trap" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-10 | Issue-5, October 2026, pp.323-333, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd142117.pdf

IJTSRD142117

Copyright © 2026 by author (s) and International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development Journal. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0) (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0)

KEYWORDS: *China, Thucydides's Trap, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Hedging, QUAD, AUKUS, Regional Security, China-US Rivalry.*

INTRODUCTION

China's rise has become one of the most important developments in contemporary international politics. During the last four decades, China has transformed from a developing economy into a major global power. It is now the world's second-largest economy and one of the leading trading nations. China has also expanded its military strength, technological capacity, and diplomatic influence. These changes have affected the balance of power in Asia and have reshaped regional security, trade, and strategic relations across the Indo-Pacific.

The growing influence of China has revived interest in the idea of Thucydides's Trap. The concept comes from the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, who argued that the rise of Athens created fear in Sparta and contributed to the Peloponnesian War. In recent years, Graham Allison used this idea to explain the growing rivalry between China and the United States. Most studies focus on whether competition between the two countries could lead to a major military conflict. Taiwan, the South China Sea, and military competition in the Indo-Pacific are often discussed as possible flashpoints.

This article argues that China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through direct war with the United States. Instead, its economic expansion, military modernisation, maritime claims, and technological ambitions have created the regional fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging that

form the trap's underlying dynamics. Countries such as India, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines have strengthened defence cooperation and security partnerships while continuing substantial economic engagement with China. The Indo-Pacific is therefore better understood as a region of competitive coexistence rather than inevitable military confrontation.

China initially promoted the ideas of Peaceful Rise and Peaceful Development to reassure neighbouring states. It expanded trade, infrastructure investment, and regional connectivity through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. However, developments in the South China Sea, military pressure around Taiwan, border tensions with India, and a more assertive diplomatic approach increased strategic mistrust across the region. Many governments now view China as both an economic partner and a security challenge.

This study examines how China's rise has changed regional security behaviour in the Indo-Pacific. It focuses on four related issues: the growth of strategic fear, the formation of balancing coalitions, the rise of strategic hedging, and the relevance of Thucydides's Trap in contemporary international politics. The study uses a qualitative approach based on academic literature, policy reports, and recent geopolitical developments. It argues that the most important consequence of China's rise has been the restructuring of regional security behaviour rather than the outbreak of major-power war.

Literature Review and Research Gap:

China's rise has attracted extensive attention in international relations and strategic studies. Scholars have examined its economic growth, military modernisation, technological progress, and global influence. A major debate concerns whether China's rise will remain peaceful or lead to a deeper challenge to the existing international order.

The discussion on Thucydides's Trap is central to this debate. Allison argues that conflict becomes more likely when a rising power challenges an established power. His work has shaped many studies on China-US rivalry and power transition. However, other scholars question the idea that war is a likely outcome. Nye argues that nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and international institutions reduce the chances of direct conflict between major powers. Ikenberry also suggests that China has gained significant benefits from the existing international system and may continue to operate within many of its institutions.

Another group of scholars focuses on China's expanding global influence. Shambaugh argues that China has increased its international presence through trade, investment, diplomacy, and institutional participation. Doshi presents a stronger strategic argument and suggests that China seeks to reshape the regional and global order in ways that support its long-term interests. Rolland shows that the Belt and Road Initiative has both economic and strategic importance.

Research on China's military behaviour has produced mixed conclusions. Fravel argues that China has often acted with caution in territorial disputes. Kaplan, however, sees China's activities in the South China Sea as evidence of growing strategic assertiveness. More recent studies examine China's naval expansion, military pressure around Taiwan, and regional security competition in the Indo-Pacific.

The literature on regional responses is also divided. Mearsheimer argues that states balance against a rising power when they perceive a security threat. This view is reflected in studies of QUAD, AUKUS, and defence cooperation among India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. Medcalf argues that the Indo-Pacific has become the main arena of strategic competition and that regional partnerships are increasingly shaped by concerns about China's behaviour. In contrast, Acharya and Tow argue that many Asian states follow strategic hedging rather than strict alliance politics. They maintain economic engagement with China while strengthening security cooperation with other powers.

A growing body of scholarship examines strategic hedging as an alternative to traditional alliance politics. Acharya argues that many Asian states seek strategic autonomy by combining economic engagement with China and security cooperation with other major powers. Tow also suggests that Indo-Pacific countries avoid rigid bloc politics and instead pursue flexible security partnerships that preserve diplomatic and economic options. Evelyn Goh further explains hedging as a strategy through which states avoid complete alignment with any single major power while preparing for uncertain future security conditions. This literature shows that regional responses to China's rise cannot be understood only through balancing or bandwagoning, but must also include strategies that combine cooperation, caution, and security diversification.

Although the literature is extensive, three important gaps remain. First, many studies examine Taiwan, the South China Sea, the India-China border, QUAD, or AUKUS separately. Few studies analyse these issues together within a single

framework centred on regional fear and strategic behaviour. Second, much of the debate focuses on whether China and the United States will go to war. Less attention has been given to how China's rise has already changed the behaviour of regional states even without major-power conflict. Third, recent developments after 2020, including the Ladakh clashes, increased military activity around Taiwan, expanding QUAD cooperation, AUKUS, and technology restrictions, have significantly altered the regional security environment.

This study addresses these gaps by shifting the focus from war to fear. It argues that China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through direct military conflict with the United States. Instead, China's rise has generated strategic fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging across the Indo- Pacific. By bringing together evidence from Taiwan, the South China Sea, the India-China border, QUAD, AUKUS, and ASEAN security behaviour, the study offers a broader understanding of how China's rise has reshaped regional security dynamics.

Significance:

This study is important because it offers a different way of understanding China's rise and its impact on the Indo-Pacific. Most studies on Thucydides's Trap focus on whether China and the United States are moving towards war. This article shifts the focus from war to fear. It shows that China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through direct military conflict with the United States. Instead, it has created strategic fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging across the Indo- Pacific. This helps explain regional security behaviour more clearly than a simple prediction of future war.

The study also contributes to research on Indo-Pacific geopolitics by bringing together Taiwan, the South China Sea, the India-China border, QUAD, AUKUS, and ASEAN security behaviour within a single analytical framework. Examining these issues together provides a broader understanding of how China's rise has changed regional politics and security cooperation. The findings can help policymakers understand why many Asian countries continue economic engagement with China while strengthening defence partnerships with other powers. The study therefore contributes to both academic research and policy debates on the future of the Indo-Pacific order.

Objectives:

This study aims to examine how China's rise has changed regional security behaviour across the Indo-Pacific. It seeks to explain why China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through direct military conflict with the United States, yet has created the regional fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging that form the trap's underlying dynamics.

The study examines how China's economic expansion, military modernisation, maritime claims, and technological ambitions have influenced security perceptions among neighbouring states. It also analyses the growth of balancing coalitions such as QUAD and AUKUS and their role in shaping regional defence cooperation. Another objective is to explain why many Asian countries continue economic engagement with China while strengthening security partnerships with other major powers. The study further evaluates the relevance of Thucydides's Trap in the context of contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Finally, it aims to contribute to the literature on China's rise and regional security by integrating strategic fear, balancing behaviour, and strategic hedging within a single analytical framework.

Research Methodology and Limitations:

This study uses a qualitative and analytical research design to examine how China's rise has changed regional security behaviour in the Indo-Pacific. The study focuses on strategic fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging among regional states. It also examines the relevance of Thucydides's Trap in explaining these developments. A qualitative approach is suitable because the study analyses foreign policy decisions, security perceptions, diplomatic behaviour, and regional power relations rather than statistical data.

The research is based mainly on secondary sources. It uses peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, defence studies, government documents, and publications from international research institutions. Major sources include reports from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Observer Research Foundation, and ASEAN publications. These sources provide reliable information on military trends, regional security, trade, and strategic competition.

The study gives greater attention to literature published between 2022 and 2025 because this period includes important developments such as the India-China border tensions, increased military activity around Taiwan, the expansion of QUAD cooperation, the implementation of AUKUS, and growing competition in technology and supply chains. Earlier works are used mainly to explain key

theories such as Thucydides's Trap, realism, liberalism, and strategic hedging.

The analysis is organised around four themes: China's regional assertiveness, balancing coalitions, strategic hedging, and the changing relevance of Thucydides's Trap. The study examines these themes through selected cases, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, the India-China border dispute, QUAD, AUKUS, and ASEAN security behaviour. These cases were chosen because they clearly show how regional states have responded to China's expanding influence.

The study has some limitations. It relies mainly on secondary sources and does not include interviews with policymakers or military officials. Access to classified defence information and confidential diplomatic discussions is not possible. Most of the sources used are published in English, which may limit access to Chinese-language scholarship. The study also does not use quantitative models because its purpose is to explain regional security behaviour and strategic responses. Despite these limitations, the selected methodology provides a strong basis for analysing how China's rise has generated fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging across the Indo-Pacific region.

From Peaceful Rise to Strategic Fear: China's Regional Assertiveness:

China's rise has changed the security environment of the Indo-Pacific more than any other development in recent decades. During the early period of economic reform, many Asian countries welcomed China's growth. China became an important market for exports, a major source of investment, and a key part of regional supply chains. Chinese leaders promoted the ideas of Peaceful Rise and later Peaceful Development. They argued that China sought prosperity through trade, investment, and cooperation rather than military expansion. This message was intended to reduce fear among neighbouring states and reassure the wider international community.

For a time, this approach appeared successful. China became the largest trading partner for many Asian economies. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, it financed ports, roads, railways, and energy projects across the region. Chinese investment supported infrastructure development in several developing countries. Economic links between China and the rest of Asia became stronger than at any earlier stage. Many governments viewed China as an important partner for economic growth and regional development.

However, economic cooperation did not remove security concerns. As China's military and strategic power increased, regional perceptions began to change. The rapid growth of the People's Liberation Army, especially its navy and missile forces, altered the balance of power in East Asia. China increased defence spending, expanded naval patrols, and developed advanced missile, cyber, and space capabilities. These developments raised questions about China's long-term intentions and encouraged neighbouring states to review their security policies.

The South China Sea became one of the main sources of strategic fear. China claims large areas of the sea through the Nine-Dash Line, which overlaps with the claims of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. China also built artificial islands and developed military facilities on several disputed features. Airfields, radar systems, missile sites, and naval infrastructure increased China's ability to project power across the region. Many Southeast Asian countries viewed these actions as attempts to change the regional balance of power. China's rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling further increased concerns about maritime security and the rules-based order.

China has also used grey-zone tactics such as coast guard operations, maritime militia activity, and coercive diplomacy that remain below the threshold of conventional war but increase pressure on neighbouring states and contribute to regional insecurity.

Taiwan has become another major source of regional anxiety. China considers Taiwan part of its territory and has repeatedly stated that reunification remains a national objective. In recent years, Chinese military aircraft and naval vessels have operated more frequently around Taiwan. Large- scale military exercises and missile activities have increased pressure across the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan has responded by strengthening defence preparedness and expanding security cooperation with the United States. Many governments now view the Taiwan Strait as one of the most dangerous flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific.

China's border relationship with India has also become more tense. The clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020 marked the most serious confrontation between the two countries in decades. Both sides increased military deployments along the Himalayan border, and the dispute affected broader strategic relations between India and China. India accelerated border infrastructure development, increased defence preparedness, and strengthened cooperation with countries such as the United

States, Japan, and Australia. The border dispute showed that China's rise had security consequences beyond the maritime domain.

China's diplomatic behaviour has also influenced regional perceptions. During the last decade, Chinese officials increasingly adopted a more forceful public approach that became known as Wolf Warrior diplomacy. Chinese diplomats often responded sharply to criticism from foreign governments and international organisations. Although this approach was intended to defend national interests, it created negative reactions in many countries. Governments that had previously focused mainly on economic cooperation with China began to pay greater attention to political and security risks.

Technology has become another source of strategic concern. China's progress in telecommunications, artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, and advanced manufacturing increased its influence across the region. Several governments became concerned about dependence on Chinese technology and supply chains. Restrictions on Chinese technology companies and efforts to diversify production networks reflected these concerns. Security competition now extends beyond military power to include data, digital networks, and technological standards.

The combined effect of these developments has been the growth of strategic fear rather than immediate military conflict. China has not fought a major war with the United States, but its regional behaviour has changed how neighbouring states think about security. Countries across the Indo-Pacific increasingly view China as both an economic partner and a strategic challenge. This change in perception has become the foundation for balancing coalitions and strategic hedging across the region. China's rise has therefore produced many of the conditions associated with Thucydides's Trap even without the outbreak of major-power war.

Balancing Coalitions in the Indo-Pacific: QUAD, AUKUS, and Regional Security Responses:

China's rise has encouraged many Indo-Pacific countries to strengthen defence cooperation and security partnerships. As strategic fear increased, regional governments began to improve military coordination, maritime security, and technology cooperation. These responses did not emerge from a single event. They developed gradually as China expanded its military capabilities, maritime presence, and regional influence. The result has been the growth of balancing coalitions across the Indo-Pacific. These coalitions are not always formal military alliances. Many are flexible security arrangements designed to improve deterrence and preserve a stable regional balance of power.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as QUAD, is one of the most important examples of this trend. The group includes India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. Although the four countries first cooperated after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, QUAD became more active as concerns about China's regional behaviour increased. The group now holds regular leaders' meetings, foreign ministers' meetings, and joint military exercises. It also cooperates on maritime security, critical technologies, supply chains, infrastructure, and disaster response. QUAD does not describe itself as an alliance against China, but its growing security role has been shaped by concerns about China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific. QUAD and AUKUS should not be viewed as equivalent institutions. QUAD functions primarily as a strategic coordination framework focused on diplomacy, maritime cooperation, technology, and regional resilience, whereas AUKUS is a defence and advanced technology partnership centred on military capability and deterrence.

India's role in QUAD became stronger after the border clashes with China in 2020. The confrontation in the Galwan Valley increased strategic mistrust between the two countries. India expanded military deployments along the Himalayan border and increased defence cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia. Naval exercises such as the Malabar series became more important after 2020. India also increased cooperation in intelligence sharing, defence technology, and maritime security. These developments show that China's rise has affected both maritime and continental security in Asia.

Japan has also adjusted its security policy in response to China's growing military power. For many years, Japan maintained a relatively restrained defence posture. In recent years, however, Japan increased defence spending, improved missile capabilities, and strengthened security cooperation with regional partners. Japan's national security strategy now places greater emphasis on the Indo- Pacific and identifies China as a major strategic challenge. Japan has expanded defence cooperation with Australia, India, and several Southeast Asian countries. These changes reflect broader regional concerns about China's military expansion and maritime activity.

Australia's response became more significant with the creation of AUKUS. In 2021, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom announced a new security partnership that includes cooperation on nuclear-powered submarines, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and advanced defence systems. AUKUS represents a deeper level of military cooperation than many earlier regional arrangements. It is intended to strengthen long-term deterrence and defence readiness across the Indo-Pacific. Although AUKUS is not officially directed against China, it has been widely interpreted as a response to China's growing military and technological capabilities.

The Philippines has also strengthened security ties with the United States because of repeated confrontations with Chinese vessels in the South China Sea. It expanded military cooperation with the United States and increased access to military facilities under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement. Joint military exercises became larger and more frequent after 2022. The Philippines also increased security cooperation with Japan and Australia. Vietnam followed a similar pattern by improving defence capabilities and expanding cooperation with the United States, Japan, and India while maintaining economic ties with China.

These developments show that balancing coalitions in the Indo-Pacific are mainly defensive in nature. Most regional states do not seek direct confrontation with China. They continue economic engagement with China while strengthening security cooperation with other powers. Their goal is to reduce security risks and maintain strategic flexibility. The growth of QUAD, AUKUS, Japan's defence reforms, India's strategic partnerships, and increased defence cooperation among regional states shows that China's rise has already changed the security structure of the Indo-Pacific. The most important result has been the strengthening of regional security coordination rather than the outbreak of major-power war.

Strategic Hedging and Competitive Coexistence in Asia:

The response of many Asian countries to China's rise has not been limited to military balancing. Most governments in the Indo-Pacific have chosen a more flexible approach. They continue economic cooperation with China while also strengthening security partnerships with other major powers. This strategy is known as strategic hedging. It allows states to reduce security risks without giving up the economic benefits of close relations with China. Strategic hedging has become one of the main features of regional politics in the Indo-Pacific.

China remains deeply connected to the economies of Asia. It is the largest trading partner for many countries in the region. Regional supply chains, manufacturing networks, investment flows, and infrastructure projects are closely linked with the Chinese economy. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, Vietnam, and members of ASEAN rely heavily on trade with China. Chinese demand supports exports, industrial production, tourism, and investment in many parts of Asia. For this reason, most governments are unwilling to completely separate from China even when security concerns increase.

At the same time, China's military modernisation and regional assertiveness have encouraged greater security cooperation with other powers. This has produced a dual-track strategy. Economic engagement with China continues, but defence partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, India, and other regional actors have expanded. Governments seek to avoid excessive dependence on any single power. They want access to Chinese markets while also improving their ability to respond to possible security challenges. This combination of engagement and caution is the essence of strategic hedging.

ASEAN provides a clear example of this approach. Southeast Asian countries do not share a single security policy, but many follow similar principles. They support economic integration with China through trade, investment, and infrastructure cooperation. At the same time, they welcome a continued American presence in the region and support broader Indo-Pacific partnerships. ASEAN seeks to maintain regional autonomy and avoid becoming part of a rigid bloc system. Its approach reflects a preference for strategic flexibility rather than military alignment.

Vietnam demonstrates hedging in a particularly clear way. It has strong economic ties with China and shares an extensive land border with it. However, disputes in the South China Sea have encouraged Vietnam to improve defence capabilities and expand security cooperation with the United States, Japan, and India. Vietnam has increased naval modernisation, maritime surveillance, and defence diplomacy while avoiding a formal military alliance. Singapore follows a similar pattern. China is one of Singapore's most important economic partners, but Singapore also maintains close

defence relations with the United States and supports a stable regional balance of power.

Indonesia and Malaysia also show elements of strategic hedging. Both countries have welcomed Chinese investment in infrastructure and industrial development. At the same time, concerns about maritime security have encouraged greater defence cooperation with Japan, Australia, and the United States. Their policies aim to preserve national autonomy and prevent excessive dependence on any external power.

Technology has become another area of hedging. Many governments have reduced dependence on Chinese technology in sensitive sectors such as telecommunications, semiconductors, and digital infrastructure. At the same time, they continue trade and investment in less sensitive areas. This selective diversification reflects a broader effort to increase economic resilience without abandoning economic integration.

The rise of strategic hedging shows that Indo-Pacific politics is more complex than a simple choice between China and the United States. Most regional states do not want a new Cold War. They seek a stable environment in which economic cooperation can continue while security risks remain manageable. Their policies are shaped by both opportunity and fear. China offers markets, investment, technology, and infrastructure, but its growing military power and regional assertiveness create uncertainty about the future security order.

This pattern supports the central argument of this study. China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through direct war with the United States. Instead, it has generated strategic fear that has changed regional behaviour across the Indo-Pacific. Countries have responded not only through balancing coalitions but also through strategic hedging. They combine economic engagement with China and security cooperation with other powers. The result is a regional order defined by competitive coexistence rather than military confrontation.

Rethinking Thucydides's Trap in the Twenty-First Century:

China's rise has brought new attention to Thucydides's Trap. The theory has become one of the most common ways to explain China-US rivalry. It suggests that conflict becomes more likely when a rising power challenges an established power. Graham Allison popularised this idea by arguing that many historical power transitions ended in war. However, several scholars have questioned whether Allison's interpretation of Thucydides is historically and theoretically convincing. Kirshner argues that the concept is often simplified and should not be treated as a deterministic explanation of great-power conflict. Because China has become a major economic, military, and technological power, the theory remains useful for analysing strategic competition, but it does not fully explain the complexity of the current Indo-Pacific order.

One reason for its continued importance is that China's rise has clearly generated fear among other states. China's military modernisation, maritime claims, pressure around Taiwan, and border tensions with India have changed regional security perceptions. Countries that once focused mainly on economic cooperation with China now pay greater attention to defence and strategic planning. The growth of QUAD, AUKUS, Japan's defence reforms, and stronger security cooperation among Indo-Pacific states shows that regional governments are responding to a changing balance of power. In this sense, the theory remains useful because it explains why shifts in relative power generate fear, uncertainty, and balancing behaviour during a major power transition.

The behaviour of regional states also supports parts of the theory. China's rise has encouraged balancing behaviour across the Indo-Pacific. Governments have strengthened military partnerships, expanded naval cooperation, increased defence spending, and improved security coordination. These actions are consistent with realist ideas about how states respond to a stronger neighbour. The fear of future military pressure has become an important factor in regional policy making. China has therefore created many of the political and security conditions associated with Thucydides's Trap even without a major-power war.

However, the theory has important limits when applied to the twenty-first century. The original example of Athens and Sparta emerged in a world without nuclear weapons, global financial markets, international organisations, or deeply connected supply chains. Today, China and the United States are closely linked through trade, investment, technology, finance, and production networks. A large military conflict would cause severe economic damage to both countries and to the wider global economy. This high level of interdependence creates strong pressure for caution even during periods of intense strategic competition.

Nuclear deterrence also changes the logic of power transition. Both China and the United States possess advanced nuclear capabilities. Any direct war

between them would carry enormous military and political risks. Competition now extends beyond military power to include semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cyber security, digital infrastructure, and advanced manufacturing. This form of rivalry is intense, but it differs from the military conflicts that shaped many historical power transitions.

The behaviour of regional states further challenges a strict reading of Thucydides's Trap. Most Indo-Pacific countries are not choosing one side completely. They continue economic engagement with China while strengthening security cooperation with other powers. This pattern of strategic hedging cannot be explained fully by a simple model of rising power versus established power. Countries seek flexibility because they want access to Chinese markets and investment while also protecting themselves against future security risks.

The evidence therefore suggests that China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through direct war with the United States. Instead, China's rise has produced a regional security dilemma in which neighbouring states respond through balancing coalitions and strategic hedging. The Indo-Pacific is better understood as a region of competitive coexistence rather than inevitable military confrontation. Thucydides's Trap remains valuable because it explains the role of fear in power transitions, but contemporary Indo-Pacific politics is shaped by economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, technological rivalry, and regional flexibility. China's rise has therefore created the fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging that form the trap's underlying dynamics even without the outbreak of major-power war.

Findings:

The study found that China's rise has changed regional security behaviour across the Indo-Pacific more than it has increased the risk of immediate great-power war. China expanded its influence through economic growth, military modernisation, technological development, and regional diplomacy. At the same time, its actions in the South China Sea, around Taiwan, and along the India-China border created growing concern among neighbouring states. The evidence shows that China's rise generated strategic fear even though it did not lead to direct military conflict with the United States.

The study also found that regional governments responded by strengthening defence cooperation and security partnerships. The expansion of QUAD, the formation of AUKUS, Japan's defence reforms, India's closer strategic cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners, and the Philippines' renewed security engagement with the United States point to a broader pattern of balancing behaviour. These responses have become important elements of the changing security structure of the Indo-Pacific.

Another important finding is that balancing behaviour did not replace economic engagement with China. Most Asian countries continued strong trade, investment, and production links with the Chinese economy. Governments across the region tried to reduce security risks while preserving economic benefits. ASEAN members, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, and Australia showed different forms of strategic hedging by combining economic cooperation with China and stronger security partnerships with other powers.

The study further found that Thucydides's Trap remains useful but incomplete. The theory explains why fear and balancing emerge during a major power transition. However, economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, technological rivalry, and regional hedging have changed the nature of strategic competition. China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through war. Instead, it has created the regional fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging that form the trap's underlying dynamics.

Discussion:

The findings of this study show that China's rise has changed the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific in a major way. The most important result is that China has created fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging across the region without entering a direct military war with the United States. This outcome supports a revised understanding of Thucydides's Trap. The theory remains useful because it explains why a rising power can create insecurity among neighbouring states. However, the Indo-Pacific experience shows that the trap can operate as a regional security process in which fear generates balancing behaviour and strategic hedging even when major war does not occur.

This study proposes a behavioural interpretation of Thucydides's Trap. The trap should be understood not only as a pathway to war, but also as a process through which a rising power generates fear, balancing behaviour, and strategic hedging among surrounding states. This interpretation expands the explanatory value of the theory beyond direct military conflict and places greater emphasis on the security responses of regional actors during a period of power transition.

The study found that China's military modernisation, maritime claims, pressure around Taiwan, and border tensions with India changed regional security perceptions. These developments encouraged governments to strengthen defence cooperation and improve military coordination. QUAD, AUKUS, Japan's defence reforms, and India's expanding strategic partnerships show that balancing behaviour has become a normal feature of Indo-Pacific politics. Regional states are preparing for future risks rather than responding to an ongoing great-power war.

At the same time, the study shows that military balancing has not replaced economic cooperation. Most Indo-Pacific countries continue strong trade and investment relations with China. Countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia have strengthened security cooperation with other powers while maintaining close economic engagement with China. This pattern reflects strategic hedging rather than complete alignment. Governments are trying to reduce security risks without losing economic opportunities.

These findings also show the limits of a strict interpretation of Thucydides's Trap. The theory often suggests that conflict becomes likely when a rising power challenges an established power. However, the current international system is shaped by economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, and technological competition. China and the United States remain closely connected through trade, finance, technology, and global production networks. A major military conflict would create severe costs for both countries and for the wider international economy.

The study therefore suggests that China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through war. Instead, it has created the fear, balancing coalitions, and strategic hedging that form the trap's underlying dynamics. The Indo-Pacific is better understood as a region of competitive coexistence where cooperation and competition exist together. This interpretation provides a more accurate explanation of current regional politics than the view that great-power war is the only meaningful outcome of a power transition.

Conclusion:

China's rise has become one of the most important developments in contemporary international politics. Its economic growth, military modernisation, technological progress, and regional influence have changed the balance of power across the Indo-Pacific. This study shows that these changes have affected regional security behaviour more deeply than they have increased the likelihood of immediate great-power war. The main impact of China's rise has been the growth of strategic fear among neighbouring states and the strengthening of new security partnerships across the region.

The study found that China has not fallen into Thucydides's Trap through direct military conflict with the United States. Instead, it has created the conditions that form the trap's underlying dynamics. Regional governments responded through balancing coalitions such as QUAD and AUKUS, stronger defence cooperation, and strategic hedging. At the same time, most Asian countries continued strong economic relations with China. This combination of competition and cooperation has produced a regional order better described as competitive coexistence than inevitable military confrontation.

The study also shows that Thucydides's Trap remains relevant but incomplete. The theory helps explain why fear and balancing emerge during a major power transition, but it does not fully explain a world shaped by economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, technological rivalry, and flexible regional partnerships. This article therefore proposes a behavioural interpretation of Thucydides's Trap in which the central outcome of a power transition is not necessarily war, but the creation of strategic fear, balancing behaviour, and strategic hedging among regional states. This behavioural interpretation provides a broader framework for understanding how major power transitions reshape regional security behaviour even in the absence of direct military conflict.

References:

[1] Acharya, A. (2020). *The end of American world order* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

[2] Acharya, A. (2021). Regional worlds in a post-hegemonic era. *International Affairs, 97*(1), 271-289. Acharya, A. (2023). Regional security in Asia. *Asian Perspective, 47*(2), 145-162.

[3] Allison, G. (2015). The Thucydides trap. *The Atlantic, 316*(2), 48-56.

[4] Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Allison, G. (2020). The new spheres of influence. *Foreign Affairs, 99*(2), 30-40.

[5] ASEAN Secretariat. (2024). *ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. ASEAN Secretariat.

[6] Blackwill, R. D., & Tellis, A. J. (2020). *Revising U.S. grand strategy toward China*. Council on Foreign Relations Press. Brookings Institution. (2024). *Taiwan's security challenges*. Brookings Institution.

[7] Bryman, A. (2021). *Social research methods* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.

[8] Christensen, T. J. (2020). *The China challenge: Shaping the choices of a rising power*. W.W. Norton.

[9] Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.

[10] Doshi, R. (2021). *The long game: China's grand strategy to displace American order*. Oxford University Press.

[11] Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2019). Weaponized interdependence: How global economic networks shape state coercion. *International Security, 44*(1), 42-79.

[12] Fravel, M. T. (2008). *Strong borders, secure nation: Cooperation and conflict in China's territorial disputes*. Princeton University Press.

[13] Freedman, L. (2023). Nuclear deterrence and international security. *Survival, 65*(4), 7-24. Friedberg, A. L. (2022). Competing with China. *Survival, 64*(1), 7-32.

[14] Goh, E. (2005). *Meeting the China challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian regional security strategies*. East-West Center.

[15] Green, M. J. (2022). *Line of advantage: Japan's grand strategy in the era ofAbe Shinzo*. Columbia University Press. Ikenberry, G. J. (2008). The rise of China and the future of theWest. *Foreign Affairs, 87*(1), 23-37.

[16] International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2025). *The Military Balance 2025*. IISS.

[17] International Monetary Fund. (2025). *World economic outlook: Navigating global divergences*. International Monetary Fund.

[18] Johnston, A. I. (2019). China in a world of orders: Rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's international relations. *International Security, 44*(2), 9-60.

[19] Kaplan, R. D. (2014). *Asia's cauldron: The South China Sea and the end of a stable Pacific*. Random House. Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (2012). *Power and interdependence* (4th ed.). Pearson.

[20] Kirshner, J. (2019). Handle him with care: Getting Thucydides right. *Security Studies, 28*(1), 1-24.

[21] Lee, J. (2024). Strategic competition in Asia and the evolving Indo-Pacific order. *Asian Perspective, 48*(1), 89-108. Lo, B. (2024). *China and Russia: The strategic partnership in the new era*. Chatham House.

[22] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The tragedy of great power politics* (Updated ed.). W.W. Norton.

[23] Medcalf, R. (2020). *Indo-Pacific empire: China, America and the contest for the world's pivotal region*. Manchester University Press.

[24] Medcalf, R. (2021). Contest for the Indo-Pacific. *Australian Journal of InternationalAffairs, 75*(4), 369-390. Naughton, B. (2021). *The Chinese economy: Adaptation and growth* (2nd ed.). MIT Press.

[25] Nye, J. S. (2024). Can China and America escape Thucydides's Trap? *Project Syndicate*. https://www.project- syndicate.org

[26] Observer Research Foundation. (2024). *India and the Indo-Pacific strategy*. ORF Reports. Organski, A. F. K. (1968). *World politics*. Alfred A. Knopf.

[27] Permanent Court of Arbitration. (2016). *The South China Sea arbitration award*. Permanent Court of Arbitration.

[28] Rolland, N. (2020). *China's Eurasian century? Political and strategic implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*. National Bureau of Asian Research.

[29] Roy, D. (2022). Return of the Cold War in Asia? *Asian Security, 18*(3), 201-220.

[30] Segal, A. (2024). China's cyber power and digital strategic competition. *Foreign Affairs, 103*(2), 52-68. Shambaugh, D. (2015). *China goes global: The partial power*. Oxford University Press.

[31] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2025). *SIPRI yearbook 2025: Armaments, disarmament and international security*. SIPRI.

[32] Tellis, A. J. (2024). *Striking asymmetries: India's China challenge*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Thucydides. (1972). *History of the Peloponnesian War* (R. Warner, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published ca. 431 BCE)

[33] Tow, W. (2024). Strategic balance in Asia and Indo-Pacific security dynamics. *Asian Security, 20*(1), 55-74.

[34] White, H. (2023). AUKUS and Indo-Pacific security. *Survival, 65*(5), 25-42.

[35] Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press.

[36] Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.