

# The Geo-Political Rivalry between the United States and China in Indo-Pacific: Implications on Indo-Russia Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Dakka Surya Teja

CIPS/SIS Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India

Author Email: [suryair2013@gmail.com](mailto:suryair2013@gmail.com)

**Abstract**—The article is an attempt to examine how the economic rise of China is altering the geopolitics of the post-Cold War era, especially, the Indo-Pacific region. The bipolar world order came to an end with the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of new geopolitical and strategic formations in the contemporary world order. The important developments are increasingly felt in the Indo-Pacific region than perhaps elsewhere in the world. It is because the region witnessed the intensified superpower rivalry during the Cold War power configurations were at its peak. The United States has developed a close nexus with China and Pakistan to contain the influence of the Soviet Union. In response, the latter maintained close cooperation with India. However, despite the end of the Cold War confrontation, the contemporary world order is witnessing an increasing geopolitical rivalry between the erstwhile allies such as the US and China. The former has developed close bilateral relations with India resulting in the formation of QUAD. While Russia denounces the QUAD as an Asian NATO having an ulterior motive to contain the Chinese rise in post-Cold War world politics. It is in this context, the article aims at analysing the potential of geopolitical developments taking place in the Indo-Pacific in shaping the contemporary world order.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific, India, the United States, Russia, China, Cold War.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the post-World War II security order that the United States led, maintaining a military presence in the Asia-Pacific region took centre stage. A new order is likely to replace the Cold War-era strategic power configurations in the Indo-Pacific region. Strategic actions at this point are inherently undetermined. The principles of friendship and cooperation for the Indo-Pacific order are being rewritten as a result of China's assertive actions throughout the maritime and continental expanse of the Indo-Pacific and the US engagement with like-minded countries via the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and other forums. In order to increase their geopolitical influence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, countries including the US, China, and India have developed maritime strategies. In order to compete with the US on the global stage, China is developing its economic, nuclear, and political potential. The ambition of the Americans to solidify the unipolar world order was hampered by the increasing cooperation between China and Russia. India has consistently expressed a desire for a multipolar Indo-Pacific that is not controlled by a single state, notwithstanding its strategic partnership with the United States.

Global geopolitical equations are changing as the United States, China, and Russia step up their strategic rivalry in a manner reminiscent of the Cold War. Contrary to the Cold War era, the contemporary world is a multipolar, interdependent world where emerging powers like India will likely have a significant impact on the future world order. The geopolitical rivalry between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region continues to be the fulcrum in which the emerging new world order pivots, despite the Ukraine crisis upending the European security system and placing Russia back in the foreground of Washington's threat perception.

## II. THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The Indo-Pacific region is of great significance in the Twenty-first century due to its growing economic, strategic, and geopolitical importance. The phrase "Asia-Pacific" was replaced with "Indo-Pacific" in the Twenty-first century as more importance was placed on the area. It is because of the rise of China as an economic superpower and the rapid economic development in India, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Korea, and other Southeast Asian countries. The Indo-Pacific region is becoming so significant from an economic and strategic perspective that none of the world's major powers can afford to ignore it. The six largest economies in the Indo-Pacific region currently account for more than 60 per cent of global GDP. The top three economies in the world in terms of GDP in 2020 were the United States, China, and Japan, with India coming in sixth, the Republic of Korea coming in tenth, and Australia coming in eleventh. (World Bank GDP data, 2020)

The “Indo-Pacific” region is referred to in geography as the meeting point of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, which are connected by Southeast Asia. The Indo-Pacific region is also strategically significant due to its location at the intersection of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The region is home to key maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea, which are critical for global energy and trade flows. The region is also home to key US military bases, including in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, which provide a strategic foothold in the region. Though another factor that may have contributed to the term’s emergence and use is China’s increased political aggressiveness and the resulting concern among its neighbours. For example, India and Japan started exchanging strategic assessments for the first time in 2006. The Indian Ocean is highly relevant as a counterbalance due to China’s geographic location, the Belt and Road Initiative of infrastructure investment, and the aspiration to access the natural resources of West Asia and Africa. (Kuo, 2018)

The Indo-Pacific is the center of the world’s most prevalent geostrategic challenges and those challenges are too broad, too big, and too urgent for any one country to respond to, say strategic thinkers, policymakers, defense experts, and diplomats from all over the world. The activities of the US, China, and other major countries like Japan and India will have a significant impact on how the Indo-Pacific region’s power dynamics emerge in the future. Two-thirds of all shipments of oil and a third of all shipments of bulk cargo travel across the Indian Ocean, which is the busiest trading route in the world. The Indian Ocean is the passageway for over 80 percent of China’s oil, 90 percent of South Korea’s oil, and 90 percent of Japan’s oil. According to Rory Medcalf, a professor at Australian National University and proponent of the “Indo-Pacific,” the region touching these two oceans forms “a single strategic system” as China’s sphere of influence extends West into Africa, the economies of India and Southeast Asia continue to grow, and India develops its “look east” policy. (Medcalf, 2015)

### **III. THE RISE OF CHINA: THE US-CHINA GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Indo-Pacific has recently re-emerged as a key arena for the Sino-American geopolitical rivalry. The post-Cold War era has been defined by the transition from bipolarity to unipolarity, then multipolarity. The traditional notions of bilateral collaboration and enmity have been put to the test by the new phenomena of multipolarity, which has functioned as both a mitigator and an agitator. Despite their inherent tensions and instabilities, the three countries are interdependent and require one another for security and economic growth. Multilateral engagements through BRICS and the SCO are both challenging and cooperative. Geographically close to the Chinese mainland, the Indo-Pacific has become a natural target for efforts by China to increase its dominance and influence. In addition, most Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries have already moved into some level of economic interdependence with China.

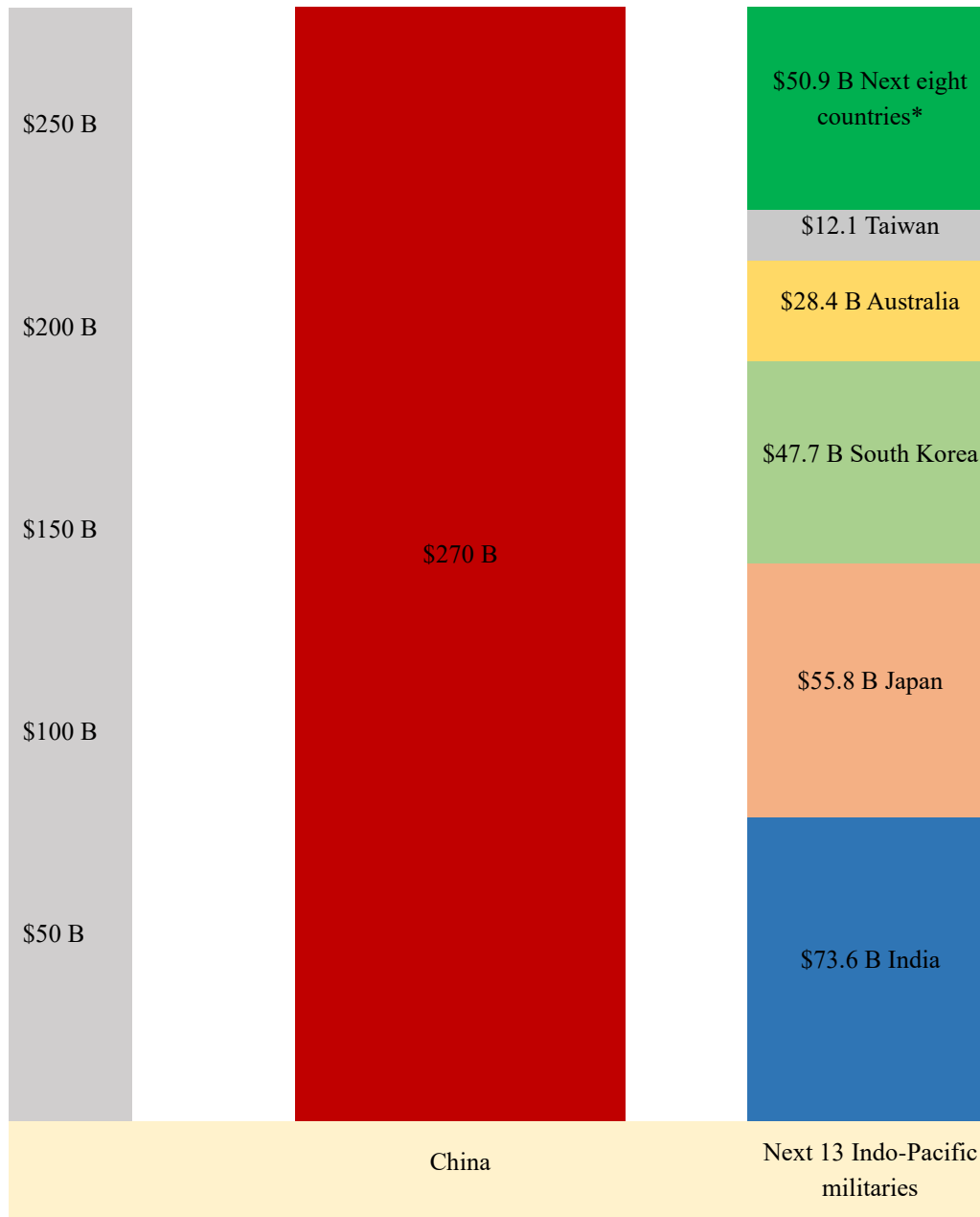
The rise of China is the most significant development in international relations in the 21st century. Everyone has an interest in seeing China which is powerful, and affluent, and has successfully pulled so many of its people out of poverty. China has profited from the laws that support global investment and commerce, such as those of the World Trade Organization. As China has developed its economy, it has become more adamant in pursuing its national objectives and challenging the international system of rules-based order. Australia wants to persuade China that playing a positive role in that system will serve its interests more effectively. In terms of key and developing technologies, defense, and security, it is a potent close rival of the United States. (Hanania, 2021) Cooperation is possible in the fields of nuclear policy, pandemic preparedness, and climate change. However, Xinjiang’s violations of human rights and Taiwan’s and Hong Kong’s treatment are being criticized. (Human Rights Watch World Report, 2021) China violated a 2016 judgment by an independent arbitral tribunal constituted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which denied its claims in the South China Sea against the Philippines. Tensions have escalated over China’s treatment of Taiwan, human rights violations in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and China’s policy towards North Korea, and the coronavirus outbreak. (French, 2017) China’s aggressive decisions over the last decade have raised awareness of the threat it poses among the Quad countries. China spends more on its military than all its Indo-Pacific neighbours combined. Shinzo Abe called for a democratic security diamond, a remake of the Quad, just before his re-election as Prime Minister of Japan in 2012. (Froy, 2019) China is bordered by four nuclear powers, Pakistan, Russia, and North Korea-as well as by Japan, the third-largest economy in the world and a country with the capability of going nuclear at any time. (Hanania, 2021)

Under Barack Obama’s administration, the ‘pivot to Asia’ and US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership were both considered initiatives to counter China’s increasing dominance in the region. The US has criticized China’s militarization of the South China Sea, which has been navigated by the US Navy under the Trump Administration’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Asia’ policy, causing tensions with China. (McBride, Chatzky, & Siripurapu, 2021) The US labelled China and Russia as ‘revisionist powers’ in its 2017 National Security Strategy and expressed grave concerns about China’s motives: “China expanded its

power at the expense of the sovereignty of others. China gathers and exploits data on an unrivalled scale and spreads features of its authoritarian system, including corruption and the use of surveillance. It is building the most capable and well-funded military in the world, after our own. Its nuclear arsenal is growing and diversifying". (National Security Strategy, 2017)

China’s military has more funding than the following 13 countries in the Indo-Pacific region put together in 2021. Over the last two decades, China has increased its defense spending five times, from \$50 billion in 2001 to \$270 in 2021. The balance of military strength around the world has been significantly impacted by this, especially in China’s immediate neighbourhood.

**Fig.2. Defense spending in the Indo-Pacific region**



Source: CSIS China Power project; SIPRI

Figures are in billions of US\$

\*includes Singapore, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Malaysia, and New Zealand.

China is clearly showing that it wants to become a more powerful global player and a hegemon in the Indo-Pacific region. The militarization of South China Sea Island features, grey-zone activities, and increased authoritarian behaviours are just a few trends that have increased tensions and uncertainty in the regional order. Beijing’s ambiguous and provocative strategies to achieve that expansion through rapidly expanding military capabilities, as well as these trends, have all contributed to these

developments. It is unlikely that any one country can unilaterally provide adequate and effective deterrence to stop an unregulated rise as China's expansionism increases. (Diehl, 2021) However, India has established a strong presence in the Indo-Pacific, which is rapidly becoming a key theatre of bipolar strategic rivalry. With the Indo-Pacific region in flux, India's strategy toward the area grants it some degree of action flexibility without compromising its basic principles. Such an approach enables India to communicate with Russia, which, despite its criticism of the Indo-Pacific, has significant interests in the area, perhaps paving the way for collaboration between these two long-time friends. (Saha, 2022)

The competition between China and India extends beyond territorial problems. It also includes maritime geopolitical challenges. India is working with trilateral, minilateral, and multilateral platforms in addition to conducting widespread bilateral interactions with countries that have a stake in the stability of the Indo-Pacific. Indian officials have openly expressed their concerns over Chinese operations in the Indian Ocean, which is a significant threat to India's interests. India and China share a continental border, in contrast to the US, Japan, and Australia, and any maritime action will likely to have an impact on the status quo along the border. (Pant and Saha, 2020) The Quad, which consists of the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, is the most significant coalition. The Quad's inaugural summit took place in 2021. Only this group formally outperforms China in terms of GDP by 45 percent, exports by 19 percent, and population by 25 percent. Russia and China are also looking for partners. (Kronstandt and Vaughn, 2020) With 42 percent of the world's population, 32 percent of the GDP, and 19 percent of global exports, the BRICS group formally has significantly great potential. The Quad is seen as a response to China's growing influence and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and has been dubbed an "Asian NATO" by China, despite the fact that it is not a mutual defense treaty like NATO. (Panda and Rockwell, 2021)

The strongest Russian criticism is aimed at the Quad, which was created by Western countries to involve India in "anti-China games," according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Lavrov once called the Quad a "devious policy" that was "divisive" and "exclusivist." In the view of Russia, the Indo-Pacific is an attempt to contain China while also restoring a two-bloc framework in Asia of the Cold War era. Lavrov strongly criticized the US Indo-Pacific strategy, calling it "destructive" and intended to form "interest groups" in the region. (Melvin, 2021)

**Table. Share of Indo-Pacific players in the global indicators (2021-22), percentage**

Country	Population	GDP(PPP)	Exports	R&D	Defense spending	Nuclear weapons
Russia	1.9	3.1	1.7	2.5	3.4	47
China	18.4	18.6	12.8	25.5	14	2.7
United States	4.3	15.7	10.1	24.5	39	42.7
European Union	4.4	12	26	17.4	15	2.5
NATO	8.8	27.9	36.4	42.5	53	46.8
AUKUS	6.4	19.9	15.3	26.7	42.9	45.8
Quad	24.7	44.8	18.9	39.1	49.1	43.9
BRICS	42	31.7	18.5	33.7	22.1	51

Source: Compiled it from the various sources

Greater Eurasia, which envisions connecting Europe and Asia, has since President Putin's 2016 announcement become Moscow's preeminent strategic framework. Russia's geopolitical strategy has traditionally been mainly focused on the land, but given that Eurasia is surrounded by the Arctic, Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, it cannot afford to neglect the maritime aspects of the continent. Russia needs India as a key partner in order to achieve its vision of Greater Eurasia. (Saha, 2022) Chinese engagements with BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), where it is not a direct member, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are all combined together by the grand strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI and BRICS are closely related in Chinese strategic thought, despite neither BRICS having signed a memorandum of understanding

(MoU) for collaboration with the BRI nor having ever collectively released a declaration of purpose towards taking part in China's flagship initiative. (Singh, 2022)

India has not been very supportive of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. China's tendency to bring bilateral disputes into multilateral forums like the SCO and BRICS may benefit Beijing in shaping future geopolitics, but it is not good for the multilateral organization's smooth operation. India's capacity to work with the West-led organizations so upsets Chinese plans. (Cogan and Mishra, 2022) Due to their long-standing geopolitical competition with the US and other countries with similar objectives, Russia and China have unexpectedly joined hands. With Pakistan serving as the cornerstone of Beijing's Asian vision and the epicenter of its crown jewel, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Beijing sees Pakistan as an "all-weather ally" and a "iron brother". The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs through the Indian territory of Jammu and Kashmir, has negative political and security consequences for India. China has the option to enlarge its border with India because of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). (Markey, 2020) Russia worries that "the US winning over India into viewing the Russian-Pakistani strategic partnership as a threat" could jeopardise Russian interests. A different story is that China started the conflict because of India's growing friendly relations with the US, which it saw as a danger to its own sovereignty. India favours a multipolar world, but, in the view of international relations expert C. Raja Mohan, "if the logic of a multipolar world leads to a 'unipolar Asia' led by China, India might find itself in the fire rather than the frying pan." (The diplomat, 2022)

#### **IV. IMPLICATIONS ON RUSSIA-INDIA RELATIONS IN THE EMERGING NEW WORLD ORDER**

A long history of cordial relations has existed between Russia and India. India was a member of the group of developing countries and one of the main proponents of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. The Soviet Union, however, being the superpower, had the upper hand in their interactions. The balance in the relationship shifted towards India, in the post-cold war period, which had emerged as a significant power transformed by the economic reforms started in the early 1990s. At the same time, Russia's declining international significance following the disintegration of the Soviet Union as India's global presence is expanding. Russia-India relations have been significantly impacted by the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of China and India, tensions between the United States and China, the strengthening of ties between the US and India, and the strengthening of ties between Russia and China as a result of Russia's break with the West and the war in Ukraine.

As a result, India has not attracted the same kind of top-level interest as China in recent times. Geographical and geopolitical factors are at the top of the list. Avoiding a conflict on two fronts is crucial for Russia given its extensive border with China and hostile relations with the West. The Soviet Union made the same error throughout the Cold War if it didn't do otherwise. With China and the United States, the Kremlin has successfully waged two Cold Wars at once for decades. Therefore, it was crucial in the late 1980s and early 1990s to normalize relations with China. Additionally, Russia has been pursuing ever-closer ties with China due to their common geopolitical rivalry with the US, whereas Russia-India relations have not been driven by this same rivalry. (Menon and Rumer, 2022) Rather India and China have had a hostile relationship for a long time, despite various attempts at detente. This is largely because of the implications of the 1962 war, in which the former lost a considerable amount of territory to the latter, and subsequent border conflicts. (Hilger, 2016) But India and Russia have had links for more than two generations. In the years following the Cold War, Russian equipment still makes up a major portion of the force structure of the Indian Armed Forces, but Russia is up against the competition in the Indian arms market. Russian arms sales to India have decreased recently as a result of India's aim to diversify its source of weaponry and build up its own defense sector. However, it is important to note that India has not endorsed the sanctions the West has imposed on Russia. It has proven its independence in foreign policy by doing this. India is a significant market for oil and weapons for Russia.

Russia has been driven to seek ever-closer relationships with China as a result of the collapse in relations with the US and the escalating rivalry between China and India. In the case of rising tensions, let alone hostilities, between India and China, maintaining parallel partnerships with China and India is likely to prove to be a challenging diplomatic task for Russia. India is not ready to give up on Russia as a supplier, and Russia is prepared to continue being a significant source of weaponry for quite some time. As a result of the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which aims to hold Russia accountable for the 2014 invasion of Crimea and its covert war in eastern Ukraine, India signed numerous arms deals with Russia despite the possibility of being subject to the sanctions. (Menon and Rumer, 2022) Russia has expressed serious concern over India's strengthening security ties with the US in response to Chinese aggression along the Line of Actual Control. Russia is mainly worried about India's involvement in the Indo-Pacific through groups like the Quad.

In addition to it, with the emergence of cooperation between Russia and China in their strategy with regard to international affairs, as opposed to the US, may have been the most significant reason. After Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the relationship with China, which had been gradually strengthening since the late 1980s, intensified. His trip to Beijing, which came after he refused to attend the G8 summit at Camp David a few weeks before, served as a symbol of his determination to establish stronger ties with China. (Perlez, 2012) With Xi's election to the presidency in 2013 and the growth of a personal relationship between the two leaders, the relationship with China became even closer. After annexing Crimea in 2014 and experiencing deterioration in its relations with the West, Russia turned even further toward China. The construction of the Power of Siberia pipeline to transport natural gas from Siberia to China as well as an increase in Russian arms exports were examples of the strengthening of economic ties. The likelihood that Beijing will have more influence in Moscow than New Delhi is higher due to geographical proximity, economic linkages, and personal ties between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

In this context, the United States-China rivalry could potentially strain Russia-India relations. India's growing strategic ties with the United States and other regional powers could be seen as a threat to Russia's interests, while Russia's close relations with China could be seen as a challenge to India's own security concerns. At the same time, Russia and India have continued to work together on a range of strategic and military issues, including joint military exercises, defense cooperation, and nuclear energy. Both countries are also members of the BRICS grouping, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and have cooperated on a range of economic and political issues.

## V. CONCLUSION

The United States-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific is a complex and multi-faceted issue that involves political, economic, military, and strategic considerations. The Indo-Pacific region, which encompasses the waters and landmasses from the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific, is home to some of the world's most populous and dynamic countries, including India, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia. It is also a critical area for trade and commerce, with major shipping lanes and ports connecting Asia with Europe and the Americas. The United States has responded to China's rise by adopting a more assertive posture in the region and deepening its security alliances with key partners like Japan, South Korea, and Australia. It has also sought to counter China's economic influence by promoting the Quad grouping, which brings together India, Japan, Australia, and the United States to increase economic cooperation and coordinate regional security efforts. The United States-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has significant implications for Russia-India relations, which have traditionally been characterized by close strategic and military ties. India, like the United States, has been increasingly concerned about China's assertiveness in the region, including its territorial claims in the South China Sea and its growing military presence in the Indian Ocean. Russia, on the other hand, has sought to maintain good relations with both China and India, as both countries are important trading partners and strategic allies. However, Russia has also expressed concern about the growing US military presence in the region and the potential for a new arms race in Asia. The United States-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has significant implications for regional security and stability, as well as for the global balance of power. It is likely to continue to be a major source of tension and conflict in the years to come, as both countries seek to protect their interests and maintain their influence in the region. The United States-China rivalry may create some challenges for Russia-India relations, both countries have strong strategic reasons to maintain their close ties and are likely to continue to work together on a range of issues in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

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