“The US strategy of multidomain containment and China’s counter-responses in the Indo-Pacific (2019–2025)”

AUTHORS	Saeed Ahmed
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Saeed Ahmed (Canada, Pakistan)

THE US STRATEGY OF MULTIDOMAIN CONTAINMENT AND CHINA'S COUNTER-RESPONSES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC (2019–2025)

Abstract

The intensifying United States-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has gained acute relevance for global order as strategic competition extends across military, technological, economic, and cognitive domains. This paper examines the extent and modalities of the US multidimensional strategic encirclement of China in the Indo-Pacific and analyzes China's multidomain responses, including the PLA's intelligentization, technological sovereignty initiatives, and economic re-sovereignization, over the period 2019–2025. The study adopts a qualitative interpretivist methodology, drawing on scholarly and primary sources, including defense doctrines, alliance frameworks such as AUKUS and QUAD, legislative instruments, and multilingual Chinese perspectives. The analysis shows that the US employs layered alliance-building, technology governance through semiconductor and export-control regimes, triangulated partnerships with actors such as Israel and India, and selective interventions in regional states, including Pakistan and the Philippines, to constrain Chinese influence. China's countermeasures are multidimensional: advancing AI-enabled military modernization, securing strategic port access at Gwadar, Hambantota, and Ream, and reinforcing economic insulation through its Dual Circulation Strategy and yuan-based energy agreements. Results indicate that encirclement is no longer limited to geography but increasingly embedded in digital infrastructure, economic flows, and cognitive influence. The study concludes that these dynamics are accelerating a shift toward bifurcated multipolarity, marked by competing techno-security ecosystems and divergent governance norms, with significant implications for alliance cohesion, technological sovereignty, and the management of strategic escalation.

Keywords Indo-Pacific, military artificial intelligence, hypersonic glide vehicles, autonomous drone warfare, civil-military fusion strategy, cognitive warfare, strategic competition in Asia

JEL Classification H56, N45, O33

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Saeed Ahmed, Ph.D, International Relations, Canada; Department of International Relations, Preston University, Pakistan.

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INTRODUCTION

The rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific has intensified into a multidomain contest that transcends traditional military confrontation. Since 2019, the Indo-Pacific has become the principal arena in which the US seeks to operationalize a strategy of multidomain containment – integrating military deterrence, technological restrictions, economic coalitions, and normative influence – to circumscribe China's rise. The central problem that emerges is how this strategic encirclement is being constructed across multiple domains simultaneously, and to what extent it is reshaping the systemic balance of power. Rather than being confined to conventional geopolitical competition, the confrontation now extends into semiconductor supply chains, artificial intelligence governance, alliance architectures, and the regulation of digital and economic ecosystems.

This evolution creates a complex scientific problem for the study of international relations: understanding how multidomain containment strategies are conceptualized and executed by a hegemon in relative decline, and how a rising power formulates adaptive counter-responses. Existing scholarship has addressed US hegemonic retrenchment (Ikenberry, 2008) and China's ascent (Shambaugh, 2013), yet these works often isolate military deterrence from techno-economic rivalry or focus narrowly on decoupling debates. Such fragmentation obscures the interdependence of domains in which the rivalry unfolds and risks oversimplifying China's strategic posture as merely reactive. The absence of an integrated, multi-domain framework has resulted in blind spots in both policy assessment and academic analysis.

The problem under investigation, therefore, lies in the insufficiently theorized and empirically underdeveloped understanding of how multidomain containment and counter-containment strategies interact in real time in the Indo-Pacific between 2019 and 2025 (data collection cut-off: July 2025). Specifically, the challenge is to explain how alliance-building, doctrinal innovation, and indigenous technological development are mobilized in response to simultaneous pressures across the military, economic, and technological theatres of competition. Addressing this problem is crucial, as the period 2024–2025 has witnessed unprecedented intensification of semiconductor chokepoint strategies, artificial intelligence governance initiatives, and alliance expansion, all of which carry significant implications for the future architecture of global order.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has proliferated across several strands of international relations theory, yet remains fragmented in scope and integration. Three broad traditions – neorealism, offensive realism, and complex interdependence theory – provide the dominant conceptual frames for understanding the dynamics of containment and counter-containment. Neorealist scholarship highlights how systemic anarchy compels the US to engage in external balancing through alliance formation and forward deployment, a trend visible in AUKUS, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and renewed bilateral defense agreements with India and Japan. These institutionalized forms of balancing underscore how systemic pressures generate collective responses to China's rise. Building upon this, offensive realism emphasizes the pursuit of regional hegemony: China's assertive posture in the South China Sea, its Belt and Road Initiative, and its accelerated military modernization are interpreted as steps toward displacing US primacy. US policies such as the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy (The White House, 2022) and the CHIPS and Science Act (Legislation of United States, 2022), which constrain Chinese technological growth, reflect pre-emptive containment measures rooted in hegemonic rivalry.

At the same time, realist interpretations are insufficient without recognition of economic and technological interdependence. Complex interdependence theory (Keohane & Nye, 1977) complicates zero-sum portrayals by illustrating how semiconductor supply chains, rare earth dependencies, and cross-border financial flows bind the two rivals even as these ties are weaponized. Export controls imposed by Washington in 2022 and Beijing's restrictions on gallium and germanium in 2023 exemplify how interdependence has shifted from stabilizing linkage to a coercive instrument. The literature thus underscores a paradox: interdependence that once moderated conflict is now a contested arena of statecraft.

Western scholarship has made substantial contributions to theorizing this rivalry. Ikenberry (2008) and Friedberg (2011) conceptualize the Indo-Pacific contest as part of a liberal order under stress, while Mearsheimer (2001) emphasizes the intensifying security dilemma. Recent analyses highlight the convergence of deterrence and techno-economic denial (Glaser, 2015; Campbell & Doshi, 2025, yet often depict China as reactive rather than proactive. This tendency overlooks doctrinal developments such as the PLA's intelligentized warfare guidelines. Intelligentization is an advanced integration of artificial intelligence, machine learning, data analytics, and cognitive computing into systems and structures, enabling

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autonomous, adaptive, and intelligent operations that surpass traditional automation (Pan et al., 2024; State Council Information Office, 2019; Tellis, 2025), which frame technological innovation as central to China's strategic autonomy. Moreover, thematic compartmentalization persists: works on military deterrence (Shambaugh, 2013), economic decoupling (Baldwin, 2020), and technological bifurcation (Segal, 2016) remain analytically siloed, obscuring the multidomain character of US containment.

Non-Western perspectives provide a more holistic understanding of the rivalry. Chinese scholarship, particularly through concepts such as major power diplomacy (大国外交), community of shared destiny (命运共同体), and intelligentized warfare (智能化战争), frames China's rise as restorative rather than revisionist. Yan Xuetong's moral realism situates Chinese strategy in Confucian traditions and the tianxia worldview, while Liu Mingfu's China Dream articulates a technologically empowered national rejuvenation. Regional voices from ASEAN emphasize inclusive order-building, with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN, 2019) rejecting zero-sum formulations. Singh and Marwah (2023) interpret China's outreach as pragmatic balancing against what they perceive as Western conditionality. Similarly, national strategies from Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia reveal nuanced positions – ranging from Japan's prioritization of AI and space security, to South Korea's hedging between alliance commitments and economic ties, to India's dual posture of alignment through the QUAD and strategic autonomy, and to Australia's concern with "grey zone" coercion. The European Union, meanwhile, has advanced a normative Indo-Pacific agenda, with France and Germany participating in freedom of navigation operations (EU, 2021).

Across these literatures, three enduring contradictions emerge. First, the stability–vulnerability paradox of interdependence highlights whether economic entanglement reduces or amplifies conflict risks. Second, competing interpretations of China's intent divide the field: Western analyses tend to cast China as revisionist, whereas Chinese and some ASEAN perspectives emphasize restorative and non-expansionist logics. Third, debates persist over whether military deterrence or techno-economic leverage constitutes the primary arena of competition, with recent developments in AI governance and semiconductor control suggesting that the boundaries between the two are increasingly blurred.

This review highlights the need for an integrated framework that synthesizes realist power-balancing, interdependence dynamics, and non-Western strategic thought. Existing studies, while rich in detail, often remain compartmentalized and epistemically asymmetric, privileging Western sources at the expense of Chinese primary materials. This study seeks to address these gaps by combining neorealism, offensive realism, and complex interdependence with multilingual primary sources and underutilized Chinese strategic doctrines. In doing so, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of US multidomain containment and China's counter-responses in the Indo-Pacific between 2019 and 2025, positioning this rivalry not merely as a geopolitical struggle but as a multidimensional contest over technology, alliances, and systemic order.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design to examine the dynamics of US multidomain containment and China's counter-responses in the Indo-Pacific during the 2019 to 2025. The methodological approach is structured in three stages: (1) corpus assembly, (2) data processing and coding, and (3) interpretive analysis.

2.1. Corpus assembly

The data set was purposively compiled to capture official strategy documents, legislative acts, alliance communiqués, peer-reviewed scholarship, think tank reports, and reputable media analyses in both English and Chinese. Primary materials include China's Defence White Papers (2020, 2023), the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (The White House, 2022), NATO Strategic Concepts (Vilnius 2022–2024), AUKUS and QUAD statements, the CHIPS and Science Act, and policy papers from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence in China, the United States, and al-

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lied states. Supplementary sources were drawn from think tanks (e.g., CSIS, CNAS, Carnegie, Brookings; CIIS, SIIS, China Strategic Culture Promotion Association), peer-reviewed journals (International Security, China Quarterly, Foreign Affairs), and major regional and global media outlets (e.g., South China Morning Post, Financial Times, Global Times). Chinese-language documents were retrieved from PLA Daily (解放军报 [pinyin: *Jiěfàngjūn Bào]*), Xinhua, and academic journals from institutions such as Renmin and Tsinghua Universities.

2.2. Data processing and coding

All textual data were imported into NVivo and Atlas.ti for thematic coding. An inductive codebook was developed through open coding, followed by axial coding to identify cross-domain clusters, such as "containment," "counter-containment," "techno-sovereignty," and "interdependence." Co-occurrence analysis was applied to detect relationships between military, technological, and economic strategies. To ensure reliability, Chinese-language materials were processed through a two-stage process to ensure both linguistic accuracy and conceptual fidelity. First, source texts were processed on encrypted, offline translation software, preventing any exposure of sensitive material to external servers. Second, translations were reviewed and refined by bilingual researchers with graduate-level proficiency (C1 CEFR or equivalent) in the relevant languages and formal training in international relations and security studies. For example, the Chinese doctrinal term "智能化战争" (*zhìnéng huà zhànzhēng*) was translated as "intelligentized warfare." The alternatives such as "intelligent warfare" or "AI-enabled warfare," were considered but retained "intelligentized warfare" to align with terminology used in the People's Liberation Army's own white papers.

2.3. Interpretive analysis

The study is grounded in constructivist epistemology, treating international strategy as socially constructed and ideologically framed. This interpretive framework allows doctrinal statements, alliance structures, and policy narratives to be read not only as material instruments but also as discursive practices. The method complements the study's theoretical synthesis of neorealism, offensive realism, and complex interdependence, enabling analysis of both structural drivers (e.g., alliance-building, deterrence) and normative worldviews (e.g., "major power diplomacy," "intelligentized warfare").

2.4. Ethical and practical considerations

All materials were derived from open-source and publicly available documents. The study follows COPE guidelines (2023), GDPR provisions, and China's Personal Information Protection Law (2021). Personal identifiers in social media or commentary sources were removed or anonymized. No IRB approval was required, as the study involved no direct interaction with human participants. Where classified materials were unavailable, findings were triangulated with declassified documents, open-source intelligence (OSINT), and expert symposia. Interpretive neutrality was maintained through cross-checking ideologically divergent sources (e.g., Global Times vs. CSIS).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the modalities of the United States' multidomain containment strategy in the Indo-Pacific and China's counter-responses between 2019 and 2025. Using interpretive thematic coding of multilingual primary and secondary sources, the findings reveal a layered and asymmetrical rivalry unfolding across military, technological, economic, and ideational domains. This section integrates empirical results (Tables 1-8; Figures 1-2) with theoretical interpretation, thereby situating the evidence within the hybrid framework of neorealism, offensive realism, and complex interdependence.

3.1. US encircling China

The data confirm that Washington's strategy operates as a strategic mesh (Table 1), comprising overlapping alliances (AUKUS, QUAD, JAPHUS, NATO outreach) and techno-security nodes. This modular network is consistent with Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which highlights the creation of redundant balancing mechanisms against rising challengers.

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Table 1. US-led alliances circling China

Source: NATO (2024), The White House (2022), Edel and Paik (2025), MOFA Japan (2022).

Alliance/Initiative	Key Capabilities	Participants	Strategic Impact
AUKUS	Nuclear-powered submarines, quantum tech, AI-based surveillance	Australia, the UK, the USA	Deep-sea denial capability and underwater ISR edge against PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy)
QUAD (Expanded)	Cyber security, space-based ISR, underwater drones	US, Japan, India, Australia	Distributed surveillance and AI-coordinated real-time defense drills
JAPHUS (Japan-Philippines-US)	Littoral combat support and radar interoperability	Japan, the Philippines, US	Maritime domain awareness in South China Sea
NATO Indo-Pacific Outreach	Strategic language shift, consultative frameworks	NATO + Indo-Pacific "Partners" (Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand)	Extension of transatlantic security logic to Asia

These networked frameworks follow what Mearsheimer (2001) would term offensive realism in modular alliance formation, where the US hedges against China's rise by building overlapping technological and military dependencies in regions adjacent to China's core maritime corridors (e.g., South and East China Seas).

Yet, complex interdependence is also evident: India and Israel serve as intermediary hubs for technology transfers (Table 2), allowing the US to shape Asia's defense ecosystem without triggering overt escalation.

These transfers align with the dual logic of realist containment and neoliberal interdependence, whereby US retains control over core components while leveraging allied national champions to populate Asia's defense-technological ecosystem.

NATO's 2024 Vilnius Summit marks a notable semantic shift in the Alliance's doctrinal perimeter. By explicitly labelling China a "systemic challenge," NATO moves beyond its traditional Atlantic focus, signalling a doctrinal convergence between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategies (NATO, 2024). This evolution supports the argument that the encirclement is not just regional but systemic.

Western scholars often interpret this shift as ideological – liberal democracies reacting to authoritarian assertiveness (Ikenberry, 2008). However, Chinese analyses see it as "cognitive encirclement" (认知包围 [rènzhī bāowéi]), a term used in PLA Daily to describe the West's effort to define Chinese intentions in adversarial terms (Pu et al., 2023).

The re-engagement with Pakistan (Table 3) illustrates a nuanced extension of containment through selective realignment. Coding patterns link "US-Pakistan Engagement" with themes of "peripheral ambiguity," suggesting that Washington is seeking to dilute Beijing's monopoly in South Asia without rupturing Islamabad's ties to CPEC. This analytical finding refines Waltzian neorealism: alliances are built not only on systemic necessity but also on tactical flexibility and soft-power linkages.

While Western literature often dismisses Pakistan as a "swing state" with minimal autonomy (Fair, 2018), Chinese defense scholars emphasize the geostrategic centrality of Pakistan as a "continental anchor" in Beijing's BRI-maritime convergence strategy (Abb, 2023). This reveals the epistemic gap in strategic weighting between Western and Chinese analysts, which this research helps to reconcile.

Table 2. US-led tech-transfers to offset China

Source: Congressional Research Service (2024), Segal (2016), MoD, Government of India (2024), IAI & DCX (2025).

Tech Conduit	Key Technology Transferred	Mechanism	Strategic Significance
ELTA-Bharat JV (India-Israel)	AESA radar, UAV detection, missile guidance	Joint venture via IAI and Bharat Electronics	Enhances India's border ISR and naval surveillance without violating US export controls
US-Israel Defence Aid	AI-enhanced C4ISR, cyber defense, missile tech	USD 3.3+ billion annual military aid, some co-developed with US firms	Provides scalable modules for re-export via India and Gulf allies
Israel-Singapore-India Axis	Signal intelligence, satellite comms, drone tech	Collaborative R&D centers and Defense expos	Extends US-based strategic technology through soft transfer nodes

Table 3. US–Pakistan engagement vectors (2024–2025)

Source: U.S. Central Command (2024), Kronstadt and Margesson (2022), Reuters (2025).

Engagement Vector	Key Development (2024–2025)	Strategic Interpretation
General Asim Munir's US Visit	Unscheduled visit in June 2025: Meetings at CENTCOM, Pentagon, and Oval Office meeting with President Donald Trump	Signals a strategic thaw and reinvigoration of bilateral military diplomacy, aiming to rebalance China–Pakistan alignment
Karachi Naval Drills	Exercise Inspired Union 2024 (May 2024) and AMAN-25 multilateral exercise (Feb 2025) with US Navy participation in the Arabian Sea near Gwadar	Demonstrates maritime counterbalancing and signals US presence in critical Indo-Pacific choke points
Humanitarian–Military Linkage	Over USD 500 million in flood relief airlifted by the US, with accompanying defense audits and counterterror reforms	Reflects instrumental diplomacy where humanitarian aid is tied to strategic re-engagement and soft leverage
Defense and Crypto Dialogue	ISPR confirmation of US-Pakistan understanding on AI, counterterrorism, cryptocurrency regulation, and joint training (June 2025)	Suggests a pivot beyond traditional defense ties into strategic technological convergence

The evidence-based analysis outlined above supports the view that the US's strategy in the Indo-Pacific is non-linear, layered, and technologically diffused. Rather than relying solely on formal treaties, Washington deploys what can be termed a "strategic mesh:" a distributed system of alliances, joint ventures, and technology nodes that collectively form an encirclement architecture.

This corresponds with offensive realism's expansionist assumptions, while also validating complex interdependence theory's insight into cross-border technological and economic entanglements. The use of proxy platforms (Israel), intermediary partners (India), and outreach diplomacy (Pakistan) illustrates a hybrid containment logic, making US strategy more resilient and adaptable.

Furthermore, this paper's integration of non-Western source narratives (e.g., from PLA Daily, Xinhua, and CIIS) reveals that China interprets these moves not just in balance-of-power terms, but as strategic cognitive warfare, a domain often overlooked in Western IR literature. By bringing this to light, the paper helps to fill the ideational blind spots in alliance discourse.

3.2. China's counter-responses

China's strategy is neither passive nor merely reactive. Evidence from PLA doctrine and economic planning shows a proactive counter-containment posture. PLA modernization, shifting from mechanization to "intelligentization," is reflected in indigenous R&D on hypersonic, drone swarms, and battlefield AI (Table 4).

China's "intelligentization" aligns with both Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Keohane and Nye's interdependence, as it reflects a state navigating between strategic independence and technological entanglement – especially in AI systems where semiconductor dependency still exists.

Maritime infrastructure projects such as Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti (Table 5) demonstrate Beijing's ambition to secure extended naval supply lines, a direct challenge to US SLOC dominance.

From a neorealist perspective, these outposts constitute a classical attempt to build strategic depth to secure energy corridors and increase deterrence against US maritime interdiction. Yet, they

Table 4. China's AI-driven military modernization

Source: CIDEG (2024), PLA Daily (2023b), CNAS (n.d.).

Technology Focus	Platform/Project	Capability Gained	Budget/Scale
Hypersonic Glide Vehicles	DF-ZF program (Academy of Aerospace Aerodynamics)	Mid-course evasive strike capacity against missile defense	Estimated USD 500 million (2022–2024)
Drone Swarms & Loitering Munitions	PLA Strategic Support Force, CETC partnerships	Coordinated autonomous strikes; counter-A2/AD	USD 320+ million R&D budget (2023)
Battlefield AI	AI for decision-making and combat simulations (NUDT, Huawei AI Labs)	AI-enabled situational awareness and autonomous threat detection	USD 1.6 billion Defence AI budget (Tsinghua CDI, 2024)

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Table 5. China's String of Pearls Strategy

Source: Wooley et al. (2023), Xinhua News Agency (2023), CIIS (2024).

Port/Base	Host Country	Operational Role	Chinese Investment
Gwadar Port	Pakistan	Deepwater port with naval surveillance integration	USD 1.62 billion under CPEC
Hambantota Port	Sri Lanka	Fuel logistics and satellite relay station	USD 1.12 billion lease (99 years)
Djibouti Base	Djibouti	Full-scale PLA naval base with airstrip and heliports	USD 590 million infrastructure
Ream Naval Base (expansion)	Cambodia	Intelligence and radar support post South China Sea	Ongoing (classified)

Table 6. China's Dual Circulation Strategy

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2024).

Strategic Focus	Initiative	Partners/Stakeholders	Budget/Scale
Tech Sovereignty	National Semiconductor Fund Phase II	SMIC, Huawei, CETC	USD 225 billion (2021–2025)
AI-Sanction Bloc	Joint AI Labs with Russia and Iran	Academy of Military Sciences, Skolkovo	Shared quantum/AI labs
Energy De-dollarization	Yuan-based oil and gas settlements	Iran, Russia, UAE	USD 123 billion in Yuan-denominated energy deals (2023–2024)
Internal Consumption Boost	New Infrastructure Campaign 2.0	MOF, NDRC	USD 545 billion stimulus (focused on AI, 5G, EVs)

also generate regional concern, especially in India, where these ports are seen as precursors to "peripheral encirclement" (Tellis, 2025).

Economically, the "Dual Circulation Strategy" (Table 6) illustrates selective decoupling, with domestic investment in semiconductors, yuan-based energy trade, and AI collaboration with Russia and Iran. This reflects a blend of defensive realism and complex interdependence: while Beijing insulates itself from Western choke points, it deepens ties with non-aligned states, thereby creating a quasi-autarkic bloc.

Interpretively, these findings bridge offensive realism's emphasis on power maximization with Chinese theorists' framing of multipolarity as defensive institutional balancing (Wang & Miao, 2022; Yan, 2019). NVivo memos coded under "Proactive Counter-Containment" confirm that these strategies are designed not only to resist US pressure but to shape regional order on Chinese terms.

3.3. Ideational contest and narrative divergence

The rivalry is not confined to material power. Thematic coding (Figures 1 and 2 and Table 7) shows a stark contrast between the US narrative of a "rules-based order" and China's framing of a "community of shared future for mankind." Co-occurrence analysis demonstrates that Western documents cluster "Rules-Based Order" with "Threat Deterrence" and "Ideological Homogeneity," while Chinese sources link "Developmental Pluralism" with "Economic Pragmatism" and "South-South Cooperation."

Table 7. Rules-based order (US) Vs (China) developmental pluralism

US Strategic Model	Chinese Strategic Model
Liberal Hegemony	Strategic Multipolarity
Alliance-Based Security Web	Selective Partnerships and Economic Linkages
Technological Decoupling and Control	Technological Substitution and Sovereignty
Narrative Framing: "Democracy vs Autocracy"	Narrative Framing: "Developmental Pluralism"

Western sources (NATO strategy documents, US DoD statements) showed dense coding intersections between "Rules-Based Order" and "Alliance Behavior," often co-occurring with "Economic Linkages" in Atlas.ti maps. Whereas, Chinese-language sources (PLA Daily, Xinhua, CIIS reports) linked "Developmental Pluralism" with "Economic Pragmatism" and "Anti-Western Solidarity," a pattern absent in Western data.

The co-occurrence readings reveal that in Western data, "Rules-Based Order" is tightly clustered

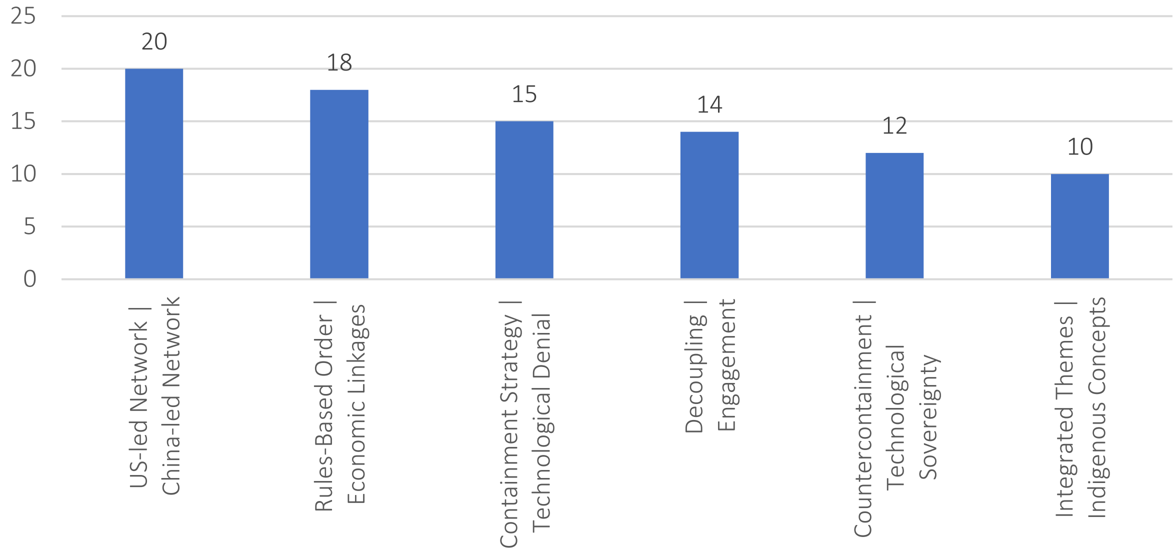

Figure 1. Top co-occurrence pairs

with "Threat Deterrence" and "Ideological Homogeneity" (Ikenberry, 2008), while Chinese sources emphasize "Economic Pragmatism" and "South–South Cooperation" (Zhao, 2024).

Figure 2 synthesizes the hierarchical coding results, showing the frequency of identified thematic clusters (Parent Nodes) and their associated sub-themes (Child Count). The highest counts – "Containment Strategy," "Counter containment," and "Global Order Narratives" (each with four sub-themes) – signal dominant strategic framings in the dataset. Mid-tier clusters such as "Complex Containment," "Integrated Literature Gap Themes," and "Techno-Security Architectures" (each with three sub-themes) indicate secondary but significant analytical dimensions. Collectively, this distribution underscores the multi-layered nature of the study's conceptual architecture, revealing both strategic polarity (containment vs. counter-containment) and cross-cutting structural factors relevant to techno-political security debates.

This divergence validates the literature review's identification of an ideational gap: US strategies integrate ideological binaries (democracy vs. autocracy) into alliance-building, whereas China promotes developmental pluralism as a counter-narrative to Western hegemony.

3.4. Multipolarity vs. liberal order

The rivalry in the Indo-Pacific is not confined to material capabilities but extends into order-construction logics. Thematic coding (Figure 1 and Table 7) reveals a clear ideational divergence: the US clusters "Rules-Based Order" with "Threat Deterrence" and "Ideological Homogeneity,"

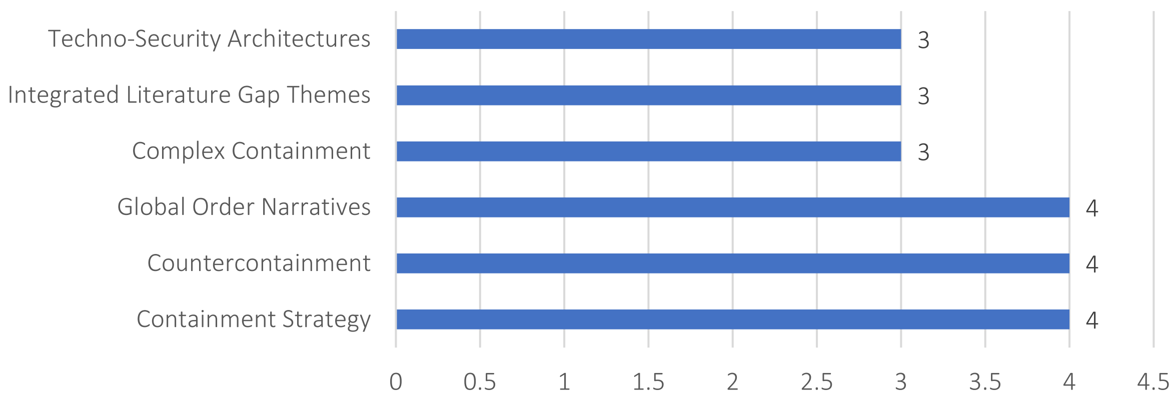

Figure 2. Top 15 NVivo parent nodes (by child count)

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while Chinese sources link "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" with Developmental Pluralism, "Economic Pragmatism," and "South-South Cooperation."

Western strategy documents (Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022, NATO Vilnius 2024) emphasize alliance-based homogeneity as a stabilizing mechanism, consistent with Ikenberry's (2008) liberal hegemonic framing. By contrast, Chinese sources (PLA Daily, CIIS reports) frame multipolarity as an ideational counterweight, supporting Zhao (2024) and Yan (2019) in their arguments that Beijing constructs legitimacy through developmental inclusivity rather than universalist liberalism.

This validates the literature review's identification of a persistent ideational gap: Washington embeds democracy-autocracy binaries into strategic doctrine, while Beijing articulates an alternative normativity grounded in pragmatic pluralism.

3.5. Structured containment and asymmetric levers

Evidence from Tables 1-3 confirms that US containment operates as a multi-vector encirclement strategy. AUKUS and QUAD have evolved beyond diplomatic forums into AI-enabled defense architectures, extending deterrence into cyber and space domains. The India-Israel-US tech corridor exemplifies asymmetric control, allowing Washington to regulate dual-use transfers indirectly (Segal, 2016; CRS, 2023). Tactical re-engagements with Pakistan and ASEAN demonstrate selective realignment, an attempt to fracture China's peripheral partnerships.

These findings align with Waltzian neorealism, where alliances reflect systemic necessity in an anarchic order (Waltz, 1979), but the US emphasis on narrative framing ("democracy vs. autocracy") suggests a constructivist layer. Atlas.ti co-occurrence maps under "Narrative Shaping" confirm this duality: material containment is reinforced by ideological legitimacy claims.

3.6. China's proactive counter-containment

Chinese strategies, as coded under "Proactive Counter-Containment," demonstrate pre-emptive adaptation rather than a reactive posture. The PLA's intelligentization doctrine – R&D in hypersonic, drone swarms, and battlefield AI (Table 4) – illustrates Beijing's intent to achieve offensive parity. Maritime facilities from Gwadar to Djibouti (Table 5) extend China's deterrence footprint into blue-water domains, countering US SLOC dominance.

The "Dual Circulation Strategy" (Table 6) signals selective decoupling, insulating critical sectors (semiconductors, yuan-based energy) while deepening South–South technology partnerships with Russia and Iran. Atlas.ti co-occurrence analysis shows "Technological Sovereignty" bridging with "Narrative Rebalancing", suggesting that capacity building and ideational repositioning are mutually reinforcing.

This behavior embodies offensive realism's power-maximization logic but also resonates with complex interdependence theory (Keohane & Nye, 1977), since Beijing cannot fully detach from global supply chains. Thus, China emerges as both revisionist and status quo-conserving, depending on the domain.

3.7. Dual techno-security architectures

Results highlight the consolidation of two competing yet interdependent techno-security ecosystems (Table 8). The US relies on CHIPS Act regimes, export controls, and Bretton Woods leverage; China emphasizes dual circulation, Huawei AI, and yuan-based trade networks. NVivo/Atlas.ti bridging codes ("Selective Interdependence," "Environmental Tech Cooperation") confirm that decoupling remains compartmentalized, not absolute.

This finding complicates neorealist and offensive realist predictions of bipolar fracture. Instead, it validates complex interdependence theory: systemic rivalry persists alongside selective collaboration in domains such as climate technology and health governance.

3.8. Bridging literature gaps

Three contributions emerge from triangulating these results with the literature review:

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1. Domain integration: Tables 1-8 collectively demonstrate that military, technological, and economic strategies form a single containment–counter-containment continuum, challenging siloed analyses (Friedberg, 2011; Segal, 2016).

2. Non-Western perspectives: Chinese-language sources (CIIS, Tsinghua, PLA Daily) introduce conceptual categories such as cognitive encirclement and developmental pluralism, absent in dominant Western frameworks.

3. Real-time dynamics: Data from 2023–2025 capture evolving alignments (US-Pakistan re-engagement, PLA doctrinal updates, NATO Indo-Pacific framing), addressing time-lagged blind spots in prior work.

3.9. Complex containment in a semi-anarchic order

Synthesizing across domains, the final axial category "complex containment" emerges (Figures 1-2). The US-China rivalry is neither a Cold War replay nor a simple hegemonic transition. Instead, it manifests as layered alliances, proxy transfers, narrative contests, and compartmentalized interdependence.

- Neorealism explains the architecture of systemic alliances.

- Offensive realism captures the logic of power maximization through forward deployments and technological insulation.

- Complex interdependence theory unpacks the paradox of simultaneous rivalry and cooperation in high-tech, economic, and environmental arenas.

The methodological chain – NVivo hierarchies, Atlas.ti co-occurrence patterns, triangulated coding memos – ensures empirical grounding of interpretive claims. The result is a theoretically integrated and validated data analysis of Indo-Pacific rivalry as semi-anarchic complex containment, where both powers are simultaneously decoupling and entangling, deterring and cooperating.

This architecture challenges the binarism of classic IR theories. While neorealism and offensive realism explain the security dilemma logic, they fail to capture the hybrid interdependence that persists in digital, environmental, and health domains. Hence, complex interdependence theory (Keohane & Nye, 1977) is necessary to fill in the explanatory gaps.

The analysis, using Atlas.ti, revealed two dense thematic clusters: "US-led Network" and "China-led Network", linked by bridging codes such as "Selective Interdependence" and "Environmental Tech Cooperation." The evidence-based existence of bridging codes supports the complex interdependence theory of Keohane and Nye (1977), showing that complete decoupling is neither occurring nor feasible – filling the literature gap on domain-specific cooperation in competitive contexts.

However, as with comparable qualitative interpretive studies in international relations (e.g., Yan, 2019; Farrell & Newman, 2019), this paper is subject to several limitations. First, reliance on open-source and declassified materials means that classified strategic deliberations remain outside the scope of analysis. Second, while Chinese-language materials were processed through a semantic translation pipeline and verified, subtle linguistic or cultural nuances may not be fully captured. Third, the temporal boundary of the study (2019–2025) restricts generalization to subsequent developments. Finally, interpretive coding inevitably

Table 8. US and China's contrasting approaches to networking

Dimension	US Network	Chinese Network
Military	AUKUS, QUAD, NATO Indo-Pacific alignment	SCO, Pakistan, Maritime Pearls (Gwadar, Ream)
Technology	CHIPS Act, AI export bans, Israel–India conduit	Dual circulation, Huawei AI, RISC-V ecosystem
Economic Leverage	Bretton Woods institutions, G7 coordination	BRI 2.0, de-dollarization deals (Russia, the UAE)
Narrative Infrastructure	Democracy vs Autocracy: Rules-based Order	Community of Shared Future; Global South Solidarity
Interdependence Status	Strategic decoupling (selective)	Technological autonomy with economic openness

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involves scholarly judgment, though this was mitigated through systematic triangulation and documentation of analytic decisions. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but frame them as contextually bounded and reflective of the available current evidence.

This methodological framework thus provides a replicable algorithm for analyzing multidomain strategic interaction in real time: systematically assembling sources, processing them through thematic coding, and interpreting them through a triangulated, constructivist lens. By combining structural, discursive, and normative dimensions, the approach enables a comprehensive assessment of how the US constructs containment and how China formulates multidomain counter-responses in the Indo-Pacific between 2019 and 2025.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent and modalities of the United States' multidomain containment strategy toward China in the Indo-Pacific between 2019 and 2025, and to analyze China's multidimensional counter-responses. By combining neorealism, offensive realism, and complex interdependence within an interpretive qualitative design, the research traced how alliance expansion, techno-economic rivalry, and ideational contestation interact in shaping regional security dynamics.

The analysis demonstrates that the US strategy is best understood as a structured containment framework, anchored in alliance institutionalization (AUKUS, QUAD, NATO Indo-Pacific framing), technology-denial regimes (CHIPS Act, AI export controls), and selective realignments on China's periphery. China's response is not merely reactive, but reflects a proactive counter-containment posture, evident in PLA intelligentization, dual circulation economic insulation, yuan-based trade settlements, and narrative reframing around developmental pluralism and community of shared future. Together, these processes produce a dual techno-security architecture (Table 8), marked by selective decoupling in strategic technologies but continued interdependence in environmental, health, and economic domains.

From these findings, three conclusions emerge. First, the Indo-Pacific rivalry cannot be reduced to Cold War analogies; rather, it reflects a form of complex containment, where decoupling and entanglement coexist (Figures 1-2). Second, containment and counter-containment operate not only through military positioning but also through narrative shaping and digital-technical ecosystems, underscoring the need for multidomain analysis. Third, the persistence of bridging codes such as "Selective Interdependence" confirms that rivalry is structurally embedded yet institutionally mediated, suggesting that the system is competitive but not ungoverned.

Future research should test the durability of this complex containment framework in the face of AI-driven military innovation, semiconductor chokepoints, and shifting alliance dynamics after 2025. Comparative work incorporating Russian, ASEAN, and EU perspectives could expand the model's explanatory reach, while longitudinal studies on AI governance and economic securitization could assess whether selective interdependence stabilizes or destabilizes regional order.

By integrating theory, method, and evidence, this study contributes to the international relations literature by offering a hybrid conceptualization of Indo-Pacific rivalry as semi-anarchic, multidomain containment. It equips scholars with a framework for understanding systemic transformation and provides policymakers with analytical tools to anticipate both the risks and opportunities of US-China strategic competition in an interdependent yet adversarial era.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Saeed Ahmed.
Data curation: Saeed Ahmed.
Formal analysis: Saeed Ahmed.
Funding acquisition: Saeed Ahmed.
Investigation: Saeed Ahmed.
Methodology: Saeed Ahmed.
Resources: Saeed Ahmed.
Software: Saeed Ahmed.
Supervision: Saeed Ahmed.
Validation: Saeed Ahmed.
Visualization: Saeed Ahmed.
Writing – original draft: Saeed Ahmed.
Writing – review & editing: Saeed Ahmed.

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