

The Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical chessboard

While the world is watching the war in Ukraine with bated breath, big geopolitical decisions are currently being made in the Indo-Pacific.



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Geostrategic race

While its war of aggression has visibly deprived Russia of geostrategic wiggle room, China and the US are vying for influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India, however, does not want to leave the area to the two geopolitical adversaries.

The current status is clear: Washington is anxious to maintain its position as the dominant hegemon, which it has systematically built up over decades. However, US claims are increasingly colliding with Beijing's ideas for a new political order in the region. In particular, China's claims to the South China Sea and Taiwan are meeting fierce resistance, not only from the US.

The stakes are high – it is, after all, a matter of global leadership. The competition for influence, power and markets is taking on increasingly threatening forms. The Indo-Pacific is playing a key role in this. More than half of the world's population calls the region its home which will soon be the largest centre of economic activity in the world. This also has strong implications for security policies and it is not a coincidence that the two global powers are currently spending the most on defence.

With about 80% of the world's trade being seaborne, sea lanes and choke points, so-called bottlenecks, are taking on increased importance. Deep-sea ports and naval and air bases make up indispensable infrastructure to monitor vast areas or, if necessary, to deploy military forces. The race for strategic nodes and naval positions has been going on for years and is rapidly increasing in pace.

US wants to maintain status quo

While still in office, US President Barack Obama already ordered a strategic pivot to Asia in order to be able to stand up against China as an emerging global power. In the National Defense Strategy of October 2022, President Joe Biden emphasised China's role as a global competitor. According to his security advisor Jake Sullivan, the struggle for supremacy will be decided within the next 10 years, with the Indo-Pacific being the geopolitical epicentre of the 21st century.

The US is continuing to rely on its strategy, viewing itself as the “hub” and its regional allies Australia, the

Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and Japan as “spokes” of a security system (hub and spokes). However, its Asian partners are set to take on more tasks and responsibilities in the future. Ultimately, the goal of the cooperation is to contain China, whose behaviour in the region, ranging from confident to aggressive, is increasingly being met with rejection.

The US justifies its activities with the demand for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Primarily, this is about the issue of freedom of navigation, but it is also about the freedom of Taiwan. Furthermore, since 2004, the US and India have also been suspicious that China is deliberately setting up ports starting from its own coast and leading all the way to the Mediterranean, strung together like pearls.

China exploits maritime Silk Road

With the new Silk Road, Beijing has a strategy for laying out a worldwide network of supply lines and hubs. The maritime Silk Road is proving its worth in the struggle in the Indo-Pacific by systematically creating access to ports or building new ones, such as Hambantota International Port in Sri Lanka. Geopolitical risks are to be addressed pre-emptively by setting up alternatives to critical supply lines. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), for example, links to the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which could enable China to counteract a possible blockade of the Malacca Strait on the one hand while outflanking its regional competitor India on the other.

Beijing has also signed a security agreement with Honiara, the capital city of the Solomon Islands, in April 2022. Australia and the US fear that China could establish military bases there and thus control maritime traffic between the North and South Pacific. Concerns were boosted when foreign naval vessels were barred from docking there in September and a US ship was turned away.

On top of that, Beijing has been systematically developing islands and atolls in the South China Sea into military bases for years. In doing so, it is considerably increasing the range of its navy and air force. This is of strategic importance, for China is striving for control over the so-called first island chain – from the southern tip of Japan all the way to Brunei. To do so, how-