



Original Article

The Indo-Pacific Region as a Modern Rimland: Strategic Competition between India, China, and the U.S.

Rakesh Kumar

Asst. Professor, Dept. of Geography, Murarka College, Sultanganj, TMBU, Bhagalpur

Manuscript ID:

IBMIIRJ -2025-021219

Submitted: 10 Nov. 2025

Revised: 15 Nov. 2025

Accepted: 20 Dec. 2025

Published: 31 Dec. 2025

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-2

Issue-12

Pp. 84-87

December 2025

Correspondence Address:

Rakesh Kumar
Asst. Professor, Dept. of Geography,
Murarka College, Sultanganj, TMBU,
Bhagalpur
Email: rkrakrak05@gmail.com



Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://ibrj.us>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18524546

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18524546>



Creative Commons

Abstract

The Rimland Theory by Nicholas Spykman proposes that the coastal regions of Eurasia are the "bottlenecks" (or the area) where Global Power is exercised, and that whoever controls those areas has the ability to dominate over the rest of the Continental Heartland. This Review Paper will reinterpret the Indo-Asia-Pacific region as a modern-day Rimland and evaluate how the Strategic Competitions between India, China and the USA, as part of the Multipolar Dynamics, are developing in this region. In addition to drawing upon previous scholarly research, this paper evaluates critical conflict areas including the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, and the Alliance Formations known as QUAD and AUKUS. The paper emphasizes how technology and economics have altered how countries approach their Rimland Strategies, and how India is becoming increasingly important as a Balancer in the Region. The paper also shows that the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region plays a significant role in altering the balance of global power; however, the paper finds that this is being done through the application of traditional Geopolitical principles combined with Hybrid Threats. Finally, the Indo-Asia-Pacific is found to be an example of the evolution of the Rimland concept which requires Cooperative Frameworks to prevent Escalation.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific Region, Rimland Theory, Strategic Competition, India, China, United States, Nicholas Spykman, Geopolitics

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific, defined as the vast area including the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, hosts numerous significant marine trading routes, richly-endowed littoral regions and greater than fifty percent of the world's population, making it a focal point of geopolitical contention. The Rimland Theory was first articulated in the 1940s by Spykman. It emphasizes the importance of the coastal arcs of the Rimland as barriers to Heartland expansion where naval and economic domination ensures global supremacy. The contemporary application of the Rimland Theory in the twenty-first century illustrates the increasing intensity of rivalry between China's aggressive expansionism, India's autonomous strategy and U.S. offshore balancing. These rivalries demonstrate the significance of the maritime domain in determining the evolving geopolitical environment of the Indo-Pacific, where extra-regional powers are increasingly competing for dominance (Ullah, 2021; Gill, 2020). The ongoing struggle for dominance among these powers will shape the future of international relations, with global and regional powers such as India and China seeking to emerge as global powers (Le et al., 2025; Kara, 2025). The emergence of China and India as potential global powers has resulted in increased naval activity and investment in regional infrastructure by both countries (Khan et al., 2019; Freitas, 2024), transforming the Indian Ocean into a central forum for the pursuit of great power interests. As evidenced by initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and U.S.-led partnerships, the structure of traditional power arrangements is being challenged, situating the Indo-Pacific as a contemporary Rimland.

This review will integrate historical and contemporary literature on these competitions to make the argument for a revised Rimland model incorporating multipolar elements and non-traditional security concerns. As such, this research will contribute to the development of an enhanced understanding of how geography influences great power interaction within this critically important region. The complexities of the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific include other factors such as demographic changes, transnational threats and the role of non-state actors,

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/), which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

How to cite this article:

Kumar, R. (2025). *The Indo-Pacific Region as a Modern Rimland: Strategic Competition between India, China, and the U.S.* InSight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal, 2(12), 84–87. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18524546>

all of which require a reconsideration of the traditional paradigms used to analyze this region. Therefore, developing a comprehensive understanding of this region requires moving beyond solely state-centric analyses to account for the complex inter-relationships between multiple actors and emerging threats.

Overview of Spykman's Rimland Theory

Spykman's geo-political strategy, outlined in his book *The Geography of the Peace*, (1944) is an alternative to Mackinder's Heartland Theory, which focuses on the "rimlands" or coastal regions surrounding Eurasia as the geographic foundation of global power. Spykman posits that the ability of a nation to project military force from the sea to shore (i.e., to be an amphibious state) allows it to dominate the rimlands, which are the most densely populated and industrially advanced areas of the globe. Thus, Spykman posited that the key to preventing any one nation from dominating the heartland is through controlling the rimlands, i.e., through a combination of the use of sea power and control of the strategic choke points (e.g., straits and ports), along with alliance building. The core characteristics of the rimlands, therefore, are their vulnerability to invasion from both land and sea; the necessity of forming alliances; and the existence of strategically located choke points (Gerace, 1991). Therefore, this concept demonstrates the importance of naval superiority and economic leverage in maintaining regional political stability within the Indo-pacific area, which represents a modern expression of the Rimlands (Rossiter & Cannon, 2020). Due to the importance of its trade routes and choke points, the Indian Ocean is a particularly important location in this Rimland, and has been identified as a primary focus of emerging geopolitical competition between rising Asian powers, including China and India (Megal & Mirza, 2022).

As opposed to Mackinder's emphasis on terrestrial based power projection, Spykman believed that the United States should engage in the rimlands to prevent any one nation from dominating Eurasia. Although Spykman's ideas were deterministic in nature, they have provided a flexible framework for strategies employed since World War II to counter new challenges such as cyber domains and climate resilience. When applied to the Indo-Pacific, this perspective defines the region as a dynamic rimland, where maritime superiority is intertwined with continental power. As a result, Spykman's ideas highlight the complex relationship between naval superiority and terrestrial based power projection, as states compete for control of the littoral zones that serve as bridges between these two forms of power.

Historical Applications and Reinterpretations

Prior to the Cold War, the United States followed the direction of the Rimland Theory when creating their Cold War policies including the Containment Doctrine and forming alliances in Asia against Soviet and Chinese Heartland expansion. The Vietnam War and U.S. bases in Japan and the Philippines are examples of how the U.S. used Rimland for the purposes of projecting power. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been reinterpretations of the Rimland Theory that have related to globalization and scholars, such as Robert Kaplan, have seen the Indian Ocean as a "monsoon marketplace" where Rimland competitions occur. Kaplan's interpretation is representative of how Spykman's original work can still be relevant today; however, Kaplan has extended Spykman's work beyond just military considerations and into economic and cultural exchange (Fettweis, 2000).

Another example of a country using a modern version of Rimland based foreign policy is Japan. In 2025, Yoshimatsu discussed Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which focuses on developing the rule of law, while at the same time complementing the U.S.'s efforts to contain China through diplomacy (Yoshimatsu, 2025). The increased level of strategic competition between nations and the growing number of maritime disputes in the Indo-Pacific area are two further aspects of the contemporary geopolitical environment that support the application of the Rimland Theory (Beckman, 2013). The idea of China's "string of pearls" plan, which involves port investments from Gwadar to Hambantota, can be understood in the context of the Indo-Pacific as a challenge to American naval dominance in the area and a kind of Rimland encirclement of the United States. On the other hand, counter-strategies that rethink the Rimland as a network of alliances among democracies include the U.S. pivot to Asia and India's "Act East" policy. The use of hybrid tactics and economic warfare is another way that the Rimland has evolved; these new applications take Spykman's concepts outside of military action.

Relevance in the Indo-Pacific Strategic Competition

India, China, and the United States are competing fiercely for supremacy in maritime security and economic clout in the Indo-Pacific, an example of a contemporary Rimland (Gill, 2020; Ullah, 2021). Through the implementation of its Belt and Road initiative, the construction of a "string of pearls" of ports in nations bordering the South China Sea, from Gwadar, Pakistan, to Hambantota, Sri Lanka, and the militarisation of the South China Sea to control vital trade routes and chokepoints, such as the Strait of Malacca, which is one of the most significant waterways in the world and carries about half of the world's maritime commerce, China has been attempting to secure Rimland dominance (Beckman, 2013; Freitas, 2024; Khan et al., 2019; Megal & Mirza, 2022). The expansion of China into the Rimland has prompted the U.S. to implement counter-measures, such as freedom of navigation operations and forming alliances such as the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) alliance and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to limit the expansion of Chinese influence in the Pacific Rimland (Beckman, 2013; Yoshimatsu, 2025).

India, which is in the middle of the Indo-Pacific, is utilising its advantageous location to keep rival great power interests in check, while at the same time improving its naval capabilities and strengthening its relationships with other nations that are part of the Quad alliance — particularly Australia — to protect the strategic chokepoints of the Indian Ocean (Nikita, 2024). Due to their susceptibility to cyberattacks and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems, which are becoming more common throughout the Indian Ocean and will continue to be employed as instruments by rival states to further their own objectives, there is a greater chance of conflict over these chokepoints (Kumar &, 2025). In addition to the increasing likelihood of conflict between

major powers, environmental concerns — such as rising sea levels and disagreements over access to natural resources — will also contribute to the complexity of the dynamics at play in this region and make it difficult to predict what type of Rimland strategy will ultimately prevail (Yoshimatsu, 2025). As a result of these complex interactions, the region is being viewed as a testing ground for new forms of hybrid Rimland strategies, and these strategies will require a high degree of collaboration and cooperation among the various states in the region if they are to be successful (Megal & Mirza, 2022). These complexities demonstrate the existence of multipolarity, and the fact that India's decision to remain neutral in the great power competitions taking place in the region has contributed to a stable Rimland order. However, this dynamic equilibrium continues to face numerous challenges and obstacles from conflicts over territory, piracy, and the violation of maritime law — all of which can only be addressed through the development and implementation of strong international legal frameworks and cooperative security agreements among the nations of the Indian Ocean (Freitas, 2024). The Indian Ocean is becoming more strategically significant to the world economy and security due to the increased competition for maritime supremacy and the building of new bases, ports, and other infrastructure (Khan et al., 2019).

Critiques and Modern Adaptations

In terms of the Indo-Pacific, criticisms of Rimland Theory indicate that the theory is based upon Eurocentric views, resulting from post-WWII Eurasian Containment Strategies to counter Soviet advances in Eurasia (Gerace, 1991). This viewpoint underestimates the unique cultural, economic and multi-polar nature of this region, in terms of how it relates to both India and China and their respective relationship with the United States (Rossiter & Cannon, 2020; Gill, 2020; Ullah, 2021). As well, due to the theory's emphasis on geography, it overlooks the ideological drivers in terms of rule-of-law based alliances versus authoritarian influence (Yoshimatsu, 2025) as well as the increased use of technology in terms of cyber threats, anti-access area denial systems and AI driven warfare (Kumar, 2025). Critics also point out that the theory encourages a zero-sum game mentality among regional powers and overlooks potential for cooperation among the countries in the region to deal with common problems such as climate change, anti-piracy patrols and disaster relief (Freitas, 2024; Beckman, 2013; Khan et al., 2019). Additionally, the binary view of the world that exists within the Land Sea Dichotomy of the theory does not account for the hybrid threats emanating from non-state actors in regions where there are choke points of transportation such as the Strait of Malacca (Beckman, 2013).

To address the shortcomings of modern Rimland Theory, researchers have developed new models of "Networked Rimland" that incorporate digital connectivity, sustainable development and responses to hybrid threats such as cyber warfare and non-state actors. Researchers also suggest that an "Indo-Pacific Rimland" model can be developed by incorporating India into the original Spykman model as a pivotal swing state and net security provider, combining elements of the original Rimland Theory with soft power, economic diplomacy and maritime alliances (Ullah, 2021; Rossiter & Cannon, 2020; Gill, 2020). Policy implementations, such as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, and Japan's complementary rule-of-law focus on developing stable, resilient supply chains, using green technologies and establishing multilateral frameworks, such as QUAD and AUKUS, develop the original Rimland Theory to reflect multipolar competitions and promote stability through cooperative efforts on issues such as climate change, anti-piracy patrols and disaster relief (Freitas, 2024; Khan et al., 2019; Beckman, 2013; Yoshimatsu, 2025; Ullah, 2021).

Conclusion

To better understand the impact of Spykman's model on how geography impacts the struggle for power, the modern Indo-Pacific region is a prime example of a "rimland," where the U.S., India, and China compete for dominance. These competing nations are represented by current and potential alliances/realignment in areas such as the South China Sea. The significance of the Indo-Pacific region to the current global geopolitical environment is evidenced by its central role in the U.S.-China conflict and by its relevance to the broader debate over whether or not Spykman's model remains applicable in today's multipolar/hybrid threat environment. Additionally, while there are many criticisms of Spykman's model, including its geographical, political, and economic constraints, the emergence of new forms of power/influence, driven by changes in the global geopolitical landscape (multipolar) and hybrid threats, have reinvigorated Spykman's model and make it relevant to the contemporary Indo-Pacific region. As competition for power in the Indo-Pacific continues to intensify, developing new cooperative arrangements to prevent further escalations and maintain the Indo-Pacific Region's contributions to a stable/balanced world order will be increasingly important. Further research should focus on developing an inclusive model to address emerging technological innovations and environmental challenges.

Acknowledgment

I, Rakesh Kumar, Asst. Prof and Head, Dept. of Geography, Murarka College Sultanganj, TMBU, Bhagalpur, Bihar do hereby acknowledge that no financial or any other support was provided to me. Also that I face no conflict of Interest regarding publication of these papers.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

1. Beckman, R. (2013). The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea. *American Journal of International Law*, 107(1), 142. <https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintelaw.107.1.0142>

2. Fettweis, C. J. (2000). Sir Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics, and Policymaking in the 21st Century. *The US Army War College Quarterly Parameters*, 30(2). <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1974>
3. Freitas, M. J. (2024). China and India in the Indian Ocean: A Study of Strategic Importance and its Influence on Geopolitical Dynamics and Security Policies. *Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 4(3), 152. <https://doi.org/10.47760/cognizance.2024.v04i03.014>
4. Gerace, M. P. (1991). Between Mackinder and Spykman: Geopolitics, containment, and after. *Comparative Strategy*, 10(4), 347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495939108402855>
5. Gill, D. M. (2020). Between the Elephant and the Dragon: examining the Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 17(2), 235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2020.1824393>
6. Kara, M. (2025). India's Hedging Strategy in Great Power Competition*. *Pacific Focus*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12271>
7. Khan, I., Imran, M. A., & Iqbal, H. (2019). Geo-Political Checkmate in the Indian Ocean Region: 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Energy Security and Indo-US Nexus. *Journal of Islamic World and Politics*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.3233>
8. Kumar, A., & . C. (2025). FROM HORMUZ TO MALACCA: INDIA'S STRATEGIC ARC AGAINST CHINA'S STRING OF PEARLS. 2(2), 15. https://doi.org/10.34218/ijwp_02_02_002
9. Le, K. H., Bình, N. T., & Hiệp, T. X. (2025). From border conflicts to maritime competition: driving forces behind the power rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean region. *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2025.2492438>
10. Megal, J., & Mirza, M. N. (2022). STRING OF PEARLS AND NECKLACE OF DIAMONDS: SINO-INDIAN GEO-STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN. *Asia-Pacific - Annual Research Journal of Far East & South East Asia*, 40, 21. <https://doi.org/10.47781/asia-pacific.vol40.iss0.5862>
11. Nikita, N. (2024). INDIA'S MARITIME SECURITY ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICAN ISLANDS. *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.4126>
12. Rossiter, A., & Cannon, B. J. (2020). Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003009269>
13. Singai, C., Dixit, owri, & Reddy, K. (2023). The Gambit of Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific: A Critical Analysis. *Deleted Journal*, 2(4), 107. <https://doi.org/10.53989/jcp.v2i4.6.chetan>
14. Ullah, S. (2021). Realignments and evolving nuclear capabilities in the Indian Ocean: effects on security environment. *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, 13(4), 262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2021.1883820>
15. Yoshimatsu, H. (2025). The Development of Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Security Concerns and Instrumental Principles. *Global Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70006>