

GEOPOLITICS IN THE HIMALAYAS: CHINA'S STRATEGY, AND WHAT "RIMLAND" STATES LIKE INDIA CAN DO ABOUT IT

by

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In the high-stakes world of global power rivalries, the towering peaks of the Himalayas are likely equal in importance to the tropical waters of the South China Sea. The mountainous Roof of the World holds the literal high ground leading to South and Central Asia and thus one of the fulcrums that can decisively tip global distributions of power in favor of one state or another. Dominance over the "Heartland" of Eurasia, which includes the Himalayas, could even pave the way to gaining global supremacy, British geographer Halford Mackinder [theorized](#) over a century ago.

A few decades later, Dutch-American political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman showed the other side of the "Eurasian hegemon" coin when he highlighted the strategic importance of Eurasian littoral states like India and offshore balancers like the U.S. in countering the hegemonic ambitions of continental superpowers. This is known as Spykman's [Rimland theory](#). What these geopoliticians told us years ago is simple but profound: Eurasia, the "supercontinent" that comprises Europe, the Middle East, as well as South and East Asia holds an outsized importance in global distributions of power because it has the largest populations, resources, economies, and political power. Should a Eurasian hegemon emerge in Eurasia's Himalayan mountains and adjacent Heartland, that state could successfully contest for global supremacy. In our day and age, China is intent on gaining just that, and the heart of its strategy is Beijing's control of the Himalayas.

Beijing does this via multiple vectors. The most prominent are its mega infrastructure projects such as dams, roads, and ports, which masquerade under the guise of development assistance but in reality are used to better push its appetite for control and, with India, Beijing's [territorial claims](#) that span from

Arunachal Pradesh to Aksai Chin particularly along the disputed 3,440 km India-China border, known as the Line-of-Control (LAC). Beijing has also pushed to strengthen its [ties](#) with Pakistan, [Bhutan](#), and Nepal, and constructed significant civilian and military infrastructure near the border. According to one report, China's military has "maintained [continuous force](#) presence and continued infrastructure buildup along the LAC." China's relentless push is not just about gaining the higher ground, but about reshaping the balance of power in Eurasia, isolating India, and achieving Eurasian hegemony a la Mackinder's theory. But a form of continental balancing is already underway – akin to Spykman's Rimland theory – that may hold the key to pushing back against China and ultimately countering its attempts at continental and global domination.

Control and Conflict in the Himalaya

China's plan to dominate the Himalayas seeks to leverage economic initiatives to push its political claims, and, if these fail, Beijing can prosecute military actions so as to eventually secure control of the high ground. A key tool in China's hands is its [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), a vast infrastructure and economic project aimed at enhancing its connectivity with the rest of the world. Yet, the BRI is perhaps better viewed as a Trojan horse that, once inside a country, is used to enhance Chinese influence and power. In the western Himalayas spreading over Kashmir and northern Pakistan as well as adjacent ranges such as the Hindu Kush and Karakorams, the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#) (CPEC) – a BRI-linked mega infrastructure project – seeks to link China's western Xinjiang province with Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea via a network of highways, railways, and pipelines. Strategically, these pass across Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan in the disputed Kashmir region of the Himalayas. CPEC will not only provide China with a direct route to the Arabian Sea that bypasses strategic chokepoints in the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca, but also strengthen its ties with Pakistan, Beijing's crucial ally in South Asia and India's arch-rival.

Beyond CPEC, China's investment in port infrastructure in the Indian Ocean basin has seen



Chinese companies – many of them state-owned and funded – build, refurbish, and/or expand [ports](#) in Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar). These nodes, while passed off by Beijing as building connectivity and expanding trade, do much to underscore China’s bold aim to [encircle](#) India and establish a significant maritime presence in the Indian Ocean.

Apart from ports and dual-use critical infrastructure such as roads and rail, China has stepped up its efforts to develop a Sino-centric trans-Himalayan ecosystem of power plants and dams. For instance, it plans to build a large [hydropower plant](#) on the Yarlung Tsangpo River in Tibet. This threatens immense ecological devastation and human displacement, and downstream countries like India and Bangladesh are understandably wary of what they see as China’s growing “[hydro-hegemony](#).” China’s lack of transparency in sharing information about its [trans-boundary river activities](#), in turn, exacerbates these concerns.

Finally, China’s military incursions, infrastructure building, and saber-rattling about its territorial claims in the Himalayas reveal Beijing’s highly aggressive face when it comes to its regional rivalry with India. The 2017 standoff in Doklam, the violent clash in Galwan Valley in 2020, and the persistent claims over Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin speak to Beijing’s attempts to [assert control](#) through force, if necessary, over these disputed territories. This aggression not only puts paid to the hollowness of China’s “peaceful rise” [narrative](#), but also has global implications. If China is successful in the Himalayas, it could have the effect of undermining India’s strategic depth as well as Delhi’s growing regional and global influence and truly tip the scales in China’s favor.

Indo-Pacific Pushback

India’s growing alignment with Japan, the European Union (EU), and the U.S., among others, highlights the profundity of China’s Himalayan grab to India’s national security and sovereignty. It also demonstrates the fact that states along the crescent of the Indo-Pacific “[Rimland](#)” are cognizant of the dangers of a

Eurasian hegemon emerging. Indeed, the concept and related strategies of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” are telling not so much for what they do today, but the shape and contours they have rapidly taken in the past five years and, most presciently, what they may become.

This vision, first promulgated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, sees a confluence of not just two oceans – the Indian and Pacific – but two worlds, one that is anchored in the shape of a diamond by India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S., but is also anchored by like-minded states around the globe. This includes Europe, at Eurasia’s western edge, and Southeast Asian states, among others. States and entities – the EU, ASEAN, Germany, France, South Korea, the Netherlands, the UK, and Canada – have all, to varying degrees, adopted Indo-Pacific strategies and policies such as de-risking and decoupling from China.

These “free and open” strategies and policies are nothing less than a vivid manifestation of both Mackinder and Spykman’s geopolitical thought. In 2024, as the world becomes increasingly polarized, the broad contours of the Rimland alignment theorized by Spykman along with the outer crescent of states theorized by Mackinder is what we are seeing as India, Japan, the US, and major states in Europe align to balance against China. The broad collaboration and consensus about China between states stretching from western Europe to South Asia to northeast Asia, the Antipodes, and North America reflects a shared interest in maintaining stability and balance in Eurasia. These Rimland states increasingly perceive China as a predatory, expansionist state. By aligning under the hold-all concept of the free and open Indo-Pacific, these states are inexorably moving, it seems, to create a formidable counterbalance to Chinese efforts at gaining hegemony in Eurasia and beyond.

India’s strengthening ties with Rimland partners, in particular, underscore its strategic role in countering China’s hegemonic ambitions in Eurasia and across the maritime Indo-Pacific. India’s relationships with

Japan and South Korea, for example, are critical. India and Japan share strong ties that are reflected in their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Joint [initiatives](#) in defense, technology, and infrastructure development have strengthened their collective stance against Chinese expansionism. Similarly, India's growing [ties](#) with South Korea enhance regional security dynamics, further solidifying the Indo-Pacific framework.

India's burgeoning relationship with the EU and some of its most powerful member-states also plays a vital role in this Rimland equation. This reflects both India and Europe's growing [discontent](#) with China. The EU now sees China as a "systemic rival" and [challenge](#) to and for NATO, as do other NATO members like Canada, the UK, and the U.S. As noted, Brussels embraced an Indo-Pacific [strategy](#) in 2021, which added impetus and opened new avenues for India-EU as well as Japan-EU and South Korea-EU cooperation to address China-induced concerns not only in the Himalayas but across the Indo-Pacific.

Of equal importance and possibly more weight geopolitically is India's enhanced political, defense and technological [cooperation](#) with the U.S. The U.S. views China as a significant threat with the power to reshape the liberal international order and sees India – along with bilateral treaty allies like Japan – as a powerful partner in counteracting China's expansionism in and around Eurasia. Most crucially, India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S. are part of the Quad or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. This [informal security club](#), for many, has become the foremost counterbalance to China in the Indo-Pacific. The fact that these four states are working together so closely about a common threat even before the advent of hostilities speaks volumes about its members' threat perception of China and Beijing's attempts to control the Himalayas and hence Eurasia.

Conclusion

As perceptions of threat in the high Himalaya from China grow, India has moved to align itself with other Eurasian Rimland states. Strikingly, India – a traditionally non-aligned giant and potential leader

of the emerging Global South – is an integral member of the Quad along with the U.S. India, both in terms of geography and national power, also anchors the Indo-Pacific concept and strategic geography. Indeed, without India there would be no Indo-Pacific to speak of.

As this complex network of Rimland balancers against China emerges, we see clear echoes of the century-old geopolitical theories which anticipated these actions and reactions in Eurasia. Both Mackinder and Spykman foresaw that a powerful state would attempt to gain control of Eurasia's Heartland via dominance of the high ground of the Himalayas and its downward paths into India, Central Asia and beyond into the Middle East and Europe. But they also theorized that key states along Eurasia's Rimland or crescent, in concert with outer crescent states like the UK, Australia, Japan, Canada, and the U.S. held the key to thwarting Heartland control. Indeed, Mackinder theorized that these states would not only attempt to balance against such a would-be hegemon but would likely do so together. The concerted efforts of India and its aligned partners may yet serve to stave off China's bold attempts at Heartland control, and thus preserve an equitable balance of Eurasian and, therefore, global power.

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