

Introduction

In the vast stage of the Indo-Pacific, a significant part of the global balance is being played out today. There converge the most heavily trafficked maritime routes on the planet, the principal hubs of technological innovation, and the most delicate geopolitical tensions of our time. The United States, determined to preserve its historical influence and the freedom of navigation, faces an increasingly ambitious China that seeks to expand its territorial control and project its power beyond its traditional borders.

Over the past two decades, the relationship between Washington and Beijing has shifted from cautious cooperation to open strategic competition. Whereas in the early years of the 21st century it was hoped that China's integration into the global economy would bring its model closer to Western liberal values, the arrival of Xi Jinping in 2012 marked a decisive turning point. His discourse on "national rejuvenation" inspired a more assertive foreign policy, oriented towards strengthening self-sufficiency, expanding influence, and challenging U.S. hegemony¹.

The U.S. response was not long in coming. Its 2017 National Security Strategy described China, for the first time, as a "strategic competitor"², establishing an inflection point that redefined the bilateral relationship. Since then, the Indo-Pacific has consolidated itself as the epicentre of competition between the two powers, where commercial, technological, and military interests intertwine.

This region, which concentrates more than half of the world's maritime trade, is where geopolitics and economics intersect with particular intensity. Both Washington and Beijing consider their security and prosperity to depend on controlling this space.

From this perspective, the concept of hybrid conflict offers a precise interpretative key. The confrontation is not limited to the economic or military domains but spans multiple spheres: economic coercion, aggressive diplomacy, cyber operations, and information

¹ Xi Jinping. (2017). Discurso en el 19.º Congreso Nacional del Partido Comunista Chino. Retrieved from: https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping%27s_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf

² The White House (2017) National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (Accesed: 02-02-2024).

warfare. These tools, deliberately combined, reflect a continuous form of struggle in which force is implied but not openly exercised.

The central idea defended here is that the rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific can, with justification, be regarded as a hybrid conflict. Military intimidation, the exploitation of economic and political vulnerabilities, and the strategic use of technological and diplomatic means configure a sustained pattern of confrontation that redefines the nature of power in the 21st century.

This analysis relies on the definition by Pawlak³ —adopted by the European Parliament’s Research Service— according to which a hybrid conflict is one in which the parties “refrain from openly using armed forces, relying on a combination of military intimidation, exploitation of economic and political vulnerabilities, and diplomatic or technological means to achieve their objectives”.

The following sections examine the principal domains in which this hybrid dynamic is manifested, as well as the strategic implications it has for international security and for Spain’s position in the global context.

Military intimidation without direct attack: the struggle for power in the Indo-Pacific

Although there are no precedents of a direct military confrontation between the United States and China, the Indo-Pacific region lives under constant tension, revealing a carefully calculated game of deterrence. Both powers avoid open confrontation yet resort to shows of force, joint manoeuvres, and strategic deployments that function as political and military messages.

The United States has maintained a policy of “competition, not confrontation” with China. However, this competition has progressively shifted to the realm of security and defence. According to Han and Paul⁴, rather than a military arms race akin to the Cold War, the current struggle is a clash of models: liberal capitalism versus Chinese state planning.

³ Pawlak, P. (2015) Understanding hybrid threats. Bruselas: Servicio de Estudios del Parlamento Europeo.

⁴ Han, X. y Paul, T. V. (2020) “China–US Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific: Drivers and Future Trajectory”, *International Affairs*, 96(1), pp. 169–188.

Even so, military exercises and manoeuvres have multiplied on both sides of the Pacific, feeding the sense of a latent war.

China, for its part, has increased its military presence through large-scale exercises described as “realistic training.” Operations such as the Joint Sword-2024A and 2024B drills—involving air and maritime patrols around Taiwan—demonstrated its capacity for blockade and control over the so-called “First Island Chain”^{5,6}. According to Business Insider, the People’s Liberation Army uses these exercises under the motto “using the enemy as real training”⁷, a statement of intent that clearly reveals its willingness to raise operational readiness.

Added to this strategy is the construction of artificial islands, military bases, and fortified structures in the South China Sea (see Figure 1). These actions, interpreted by multiple analysts as an attempt by Beijing to alter the status quo, constitute a form of undeclared intimidation towards the United States and its allies⁸.



Figure 1. Presence of Chinese military bases (in red) in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Source: Bloomberg.

⁵ CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) (2024) China Escalates Cross-Strait Military Activity under Taiwan’s President William Lai. Retrieved from: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-escalates-cross-strait-military-activity-under-taiwan-president-william-lai> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

⁶ ISW (Institute for the Study of War) (2024) “China–Taiwan Weekly Update, 12 December 2024”. Retrieved from: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-weekly-update-december-12-2024> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

⁷ Business Insider (2025) “China’s navy upping realistic combat training around Taiwan”, 14 de marzo. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-navy-upping-realistic-combat-training-around-taiwan-2025-3> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

⁸ Bolton, J. (2021) “El Ejército en el Indo-Pacífico”. Military Review, Cuarto trimestre, pp. 15-26. Retrieved from: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/Spanish/4Q-2021/Bolton/Bolton-SPA-Q4-2021.pdf> [Accessed: 03-02-2024].

The United States has responded by strengthening its alliances and reinforcing its military presence. The creation of the AUKUS pact —with the United Kingdom and Australia— represented a qualitative leap, including the transfer of nuclear-powered submarines and cooperation in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and hypersonic weapons⁹. Likewise, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) —bringing together the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia— has consolidated its role as a forum for maritime security and strategic coordination^{10,11}.

American efforts are also channelled through the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, which allocates over 40 billion U.S. dollars between 2021 and 2024 to reinforce infrastructure, deterrence, and forward deployments¹². This policy seeks to send a clear message: Washington will not allow Beijing to impose its dominance in the region.

During the Trump administration, this trend intensified. The 2017 National Security Strategy defined China as a “strategic competitor,” and the government explicitly linked its military projection in Asia to the containment of Chinese expansionism¹³. “Freedom of navigation” operations were intensified, especially in the South China Sea, while commitments to Taiwan’s defence were reinforced. Trump thus made intimidation an essential element of the U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific¹⁴.

Both powers, aware of the risks of escalation, choose to display strength without crossing the threshold of direct confrontation. Military exercises, joint patrols, and demonstrations of technological capability are, in reality, messages of power. These actions serve both to warn the adversary and to consolidate strategic alliances. As Cuesta points out, large-

⁹ Europa Press (2023) “EEUU, Reino Unido y Australia probarán un sistema de IA para rastrear submarinos chinos en el Pacífico”, 2 de diciembre. Retrieved from: <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-eeuu-reino-unido-australia-probaran-sistema-ia-rastrear-submarinos-chinos-pacifico-20231202030332.html> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

¹⁰ The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) (2021) “The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know”, 27 de mayo. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/quad-indo-pacific-what-know> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

¹¹ Associated Press (AP) (2023) “Quad leaders vow to stand up for stability in Indo-Pacific región”, 20 de mayo. Retrieved from: <https://apnews.com/article/ff2f90407d22d6e9cfab0c2dc60e57f2> (Accessed: 02-02-2024).

¹² Congressional Research Service (2024) The Pacific Deterrence Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress. CRS Report R46725. Retrieved from: <https://crsreports.congress.gov> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

¹³ The White House (2017) National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (Accessed: 02-02-2024).

¹⁴ Swaine, M. (2018) Creating an Unstable Asia: The U.S. “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” Strategy. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 marzo. Retrieved from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/02/creating-unstable-asia-u.s.-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy-pub-75720>

scale manoeuvres act as a “language of deterrence” and as a showcase for the coalitions each power leads¹⁵.

In this sense, military intimidation constitutes the first pillar of the hybrid conflict in the Indo-Pacific: a confrontation that does not seek open battle, but psychological and political dominance through presence, pressure, and the constant demonstration of capability.

The economic and political battle: exploiting the adversary’s vulnerabilities

The contest between China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific is not fought solely on military ground. A fundamental part of this competition unfolds in the economic and political spheres, where both powers have learned to identify and exploit the other’s weaknesses. In this domain, strategies of influence, dependency and coercion play a leading role.

China has deployed an ambitious strategy that combines economic diplomacy with large-scale infrastructure projects. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the cornerstone of its global projection. Through massive investments in transport, energy and technology, Beijing seeks to connect Asia with Africa, Europe and Latin America, weaving a web of interdependencies that grant it political and economic leverage¹⁶. This network, which extends into the Indo-Pacific, strengthens China’s capacity to condition strategic decisions and to access critical natural resources¹⁷.

¹⁵ Cuesta, D. (2022) “El Indo-Pacífico. Un juego en evolución”. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 40/2022. Retrieved from: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEEO40_2022_DAVCUE_Indo.pdf [Accessed: 01-02-2024].

¹⁶ Rolland, N. (2017) “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Underwhelming or Game-Changer?”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 40(1), pp. 127–142.

¹⁷ Nedopil, C. (2025) “China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2025 H1”. Griffith Asia Institute. Retrieved from: <https://griffith.edu.au/news/2025/07/17/chinas-belt-and-road-investment-hits-record-highs-in-2025-driven-by-energy-mining-and-tech-sectors> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

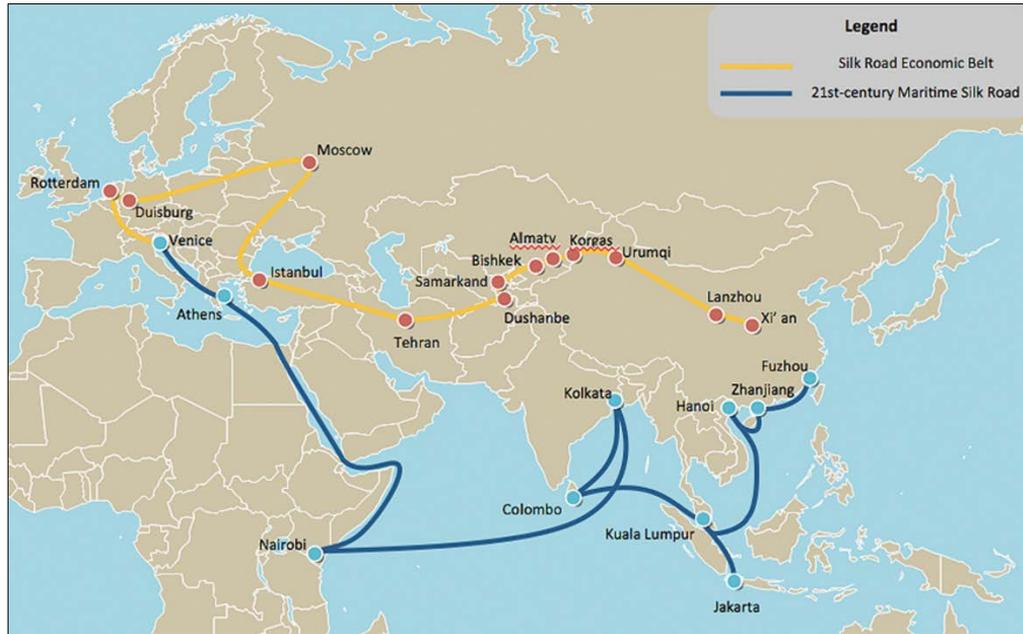


Figure 2. The land and maritime routes of the Chinese initiative. Source: Center for Global Affairs & Strategic Studies (GASS) de la Universidad de Navarra. <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle/-/blogs/una-nueva-ruta-de-la-seda-para-el-siglo-xxi>

The project has an obvious economic dimension, but also a political one. China uses preferential loans and bilateral agreements to consolidate its influence in developing countries, promoting a model of cooperation that shapes the diplomatic stances of its partners¹⁸. At the same time, it promotes strategic sectors such as digitalisation and renewable energies, aiming to occupy leading positions in the industries of the future¹⁹.

Meanwhile, the United States attempts to counter this advance with its own influence strategy. Under the Biden administration the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was launched as an economic alternative to the BRI. This framework seeks to strengthen supply chains, promote sustainable investment and offer regional states options other than reliance on China²⁰. In doing so, Washington attempts to turn China's commercial vulnerabilities into an instrument of pressure, leaning on its network of allies.

¹⁸ Borreguero, E. (2025) "Indo-Pacífico 2025: estrategias, cooperación y competencia". Madrid: Centro Superior de Estudios de la Defensa Nacional (CESEDEN). Retrieved from: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/indo_pacifico_2025_estrategias_cooperacion_y_competencia

¹⁹ Koop, F. y Moore, P. (2025) "China's Belt and Road Hits New Highs, but Latin America...", Green Finance and Development Center, Fudan University. Retrieved from: <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2025-h1/> (Accesed: 12-09-2025).

²⁰ Lin, Q. y Wang, L. (2023) "Economic Competition and Power Transition in the Indo-Pacific", *International Affairs*, 99(3), pp. 123–147.

U.S. diplomacy has also reinforced the QUAD, an alliance with India, Japan and Australia. This forum not only coordinates maritime security initiatives but also fosters economic and technological cooperation, seeking to balance Beijing's influence in the Indo-Pacific²¹. The protectionist measures of the second Trump administration—the so-called Trump Tariffs 2.0— followed the same logic: imposing tariffs of 10% and 25% on key products such as semiconductors and automobiles, with the objective of reducing dependence on China and stimulating domestic production^{22,23}.

This combination of trade policies, technological restrictions and strategic alliances reveals a dynamic of economic competition with profound geopolitical implications. Washington aims to shield its supply chains, limit the transfer of advanced technology and maintain its industrial supremacy, while Beijing expands its sphere of influence through investments and infrastructure.

In practice, both actors use the economy as a hybrid weapon: simultaneously a tool of coercion and attraction. As in the military domain, the aim is not to provoke direct confrontation but to shape the strategic environment and influence the adversary's choices.

China seeks to fill the leadership void left by the United States during its turn towards isolationism in the first Trump administration²⁴. In turn, Washington attempts to reorganise the region's economic architecture to prevent the BRI from becoming the axis of Asian trade.

Thus, economic and political rivalry becomes the second pillar of the hybrid conflict between the two powers: a silent warfare of contracts, loans, sanctions and agreements that redefines the structure of global power.

²¹ Serbin, A. (2021) "De dragones, águilas y osos: las nuevas narrativas frente al Indo-Pacífico". Pensamiento Propio. Julio-diciembre, año 26.

²² Nomura Research Institute (NRI) (2025) "The Beginning of Trump Tariffs 2.0", Jornada, 14 de febrero. Retrieved from: <https://www.nri.com/en/media/journal/kiuchi/20250214.html> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

²³ Ifri (2025) "Trump's Second Term: Laying the Groundwork for a New Trade War". Ifri Editorial, 7 de febrero. Retrieved from: <https://www.ifri.org/en/editorials/trumps-second-term-laying-groundwork-new-trade-war> (Accessed: 12-09-2025).

²⁴ Alunaza, H. y Sherin, V. (2022) "The Strategic Value of China's Foreign Policy and The Rivalry of The Majors Power in The Indo-Pacific". Journal of Social and Political Studies, 21(1), pp. 1-13.

Diplomacy and technology as instruments of hybrid power

On the Indo-Pacific chessboard, diplomacy and technology have become decisive weapons. China has skilfully combined both to strengthen its regional and global position, adopting an approach of “smart power” that blends cooperation with pressure. Its diplomacy has evolved from a defensive and cautious attitude to a more assertive foreign policy, marked by pragmatism and ambition.

In recent years, the so-called “wolf warrior diplomacy” has evolved towards a more sophisticated model. Beijing combines military demonstrations with technological deployments and development projects that attract countries in Southeast Asia, Oceania, and Africa²⁵. This dual strategy allows China to present itself as an attractive partner while simultaneously projecting an image of power that deters those who challenge its influence.

The expansion of infrastructures linked to the Belt and Road Initiative does not respond solely to economic interests but also to strategic ones. According to Martínez, many of these investments have a dual —civil and military— nature that extends China’s capacity to operate and project itself in key regions²⁶. In this way, logistical agreements, ports, and communication networks serve both trade and the expansion of its geopolitical presence.

At the same time, China has invested massively in artificial intelligence, satellites, cybersecurity, and electronic warfare capabilities. The development of hypersonic missiles and advanced submarines reinforces its deterrent capacity, while information operations and technological diplomacy allow it to exert influence without resorting to force²⁷.

The United States, aware that its leadership increasingly depends on technological dominance, has developed its own diplomatic and scientific strategy. Washington has strengthened its ties with Asian middle powers —such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and South

²⁵ Emmott, B. (2025) “Shift in China's Diplomacy in Indo-Pacific”, *Diplomatic Review*, 12 January. Retrieved from: <https://www.mainichi.jp/english/articles/20250606> [Accessed: 12-09-2025].

²⁶ Martínez, F. (2025) “China's technological military advancement and diplomacy”, *Defense Journal*, 9(3), pp. 105-120.

²⁷ Perry World House (2025) *Technological Competition in the Indo-Pacific*, University of Pennsylvania. Available at: <https://perryworldhouse.upenn.edu> (Accessed: 12 September 2025).

Korea— to build a regional containment front against Beijing²⁸. This pragmatic diplomacy seeks not only to preserve American interests but also to promote an international order based on shared rules.



Figure 3. The USS North Carolina is the first nuclear-powered submarine sent by the United States to Australia under the AUKUS agreement. Source: US Pacific Fleet. https://www.larazon.es/internacional/america/asi-submarino-uss-north-carolina-propulsion-nuclear-que-eeuu-enviado-australia_2023081064d4b4de95af7e00016df779.html

Technological cooperation under AUKUS represents a turning point in this competition. The transfer of nuclear technology to Australia —unprecedented outside the bilateral relationship with the United Kingdom— symbolises Washington’s intention to lead a community of technology and defence with high levels of integration²⁹.

During the Trump administration, this policy took on a more confrontational tone. Restrictions on the export of semiconductors and artificial intelligence technologies were tightened, aiming to hinder China’s military modernisation and preserve U.S. technological superiority³⁰. Simultaneously, allies were encouraged to adopt Western standards in matters of security, defence, and cyber technology.

Thus, the diplomacy of both countries relies on technology as an instrument of hybrid power. China offers development, investment, and digital cooperation; the United States offers alliances, protection, and access to innovation. Both strategies compete to shape

²⁸ Lee, J-Y et al. (2021) “The Indo-Pacific strategy and US alliance network expandability: asian middle powers positions on sino-US geostrategic competition in Indo-Pacific region”. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30(127), pp. 53-68.

²⁹ Cuesta, D. (2022) “El Indo-Pacífico. Un juego en evolución”. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 40/2022. Retrieved from: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEEO40_2022_DAVCUE_Indo.pdf [Accessed: 01-02-2024].

³⁰ Nedich, M. (2025) “Trump Administration’s Export Controls to Counter Chinese Military Modernization”, *Security Studies Quarterly*, 14(1), pp. 22-35.

the region in their own image, creating an unstable balance in which each diplomatic gesture carries a technological and strategic subtext.

In this scenario, influence no longer depends solely on military strength or trade, but on the ability to define the rules of the game. Whoever controls technology, standards, and cooperation networks will hold the advantage in the hybrid competition that dominates the Indo-Pacific.

Strategic competition or hybrid conflict? The conceptual debate

Not all analysts agree that the rivalry between the United States and China can be described as a hybrid conflict. Some argue that what is occurring in the Indo-Pacific is, rather, a prolonged strategic competition characterised by mutual pressure and balance of power, but without employing the full range of hybrid tactics.

Researcher Michael Raska argues that the current dynamic between both powers corresponds to a struggle for military, technological, and diplomatic influence, yet without the deliberate coordination of all means —military, cyber, informational, and economic— that would define a hybrid conflict in the strict sense³¹. In his view, present tensions take place in the so-called grey zone, an area between peace and war where deterrence, pressure, and symbolic manoeuvres prevail.

Other authors, such as Bargués and Bourekba³², share this distinction. For them, strategic competition involves the simultaneous use of economic, diplomatic, and technological pressure but does not reach the level of coordination and aggressiveness characteristic of hybrid conflict. The latter, they explain, would require covert actions, disinformation, or the use of irregular forces with the aim of destabilising the adversary without formally declaring war. According to this line of thought, the Sino-American rivalry would be a contained power struggle —strategic rather than hybrid.

³¹ Raska, M. (2020). "Strategic Competition and Future Conflicts in the Indo-Pacific". *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. Retrieved from: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2346254/strategic-competition-and-future-conflicts-in-the-indo-pacific/> [Accessed: 22-09-2025].

³² Bargués, P. y Bourekba, M. (2024) *La guerra por todos los medios: la intensificación de los conflictos híbridos. Amenazas híbridas, orden vulnerable*. CIDOB Report 08. CIDOB, Barcelona. Retrieved from: https://www.cidob.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/CIDOB%20REPORT_08.pdf [Accessed: 22-09-2025].

From another perspective, Chiyuki Aoi suggests that the concept of hybrid conflict should be reserved for exceptional situations in which actors deliberately combine conventional, irregular, economic, and media resources to alter the *status quo*³³. In contrast, the current situation between China and the United States, although tense and competitive, unfolds mainly in the diplomatic and technological realms without crossing the thresholds of armed confrontation.

In short, these approaches suggest that the relationship between Washington and Beijing does not constitute a hybrid conflict in the strict sense, but rather a strategic competition that combines economic power, diplomacy, and technological innovation without reaching open conflict.

The response: a hybridity adapted to the 21st century

However, limiting the analysis to such a rigid separation between competition and conflict can be misleading. The reality of the Indo-Pacific reveals a more complex interaction, where the boundary between both categories becomes blurred.

Authors who deny the existence of a hybrid conflict tend to link this concept to a situation of total hostility, in which all military and non-military resources are used simultaneously. Yet the contemporary understanding of hybridity sees it as a continuum: a flexible combination of instruments of power that allows actors to achieve strategic objectives without resorting to open confrontation.

The definition by the European Parliament's Research Service fits this vision. According to this approach, it is sufficient for an actor to combine military intimidation, economic coercion, and informational or technological manipulation for the conflict to acquire a hybrid nature. And that is precisely what is taking place in the Indo-Pacific.

China and the United States are not waging a formal war, but they are exerting constant pressure on the three vertices of Clausewitz's trinity: combatants, government, and the population. The construction of artificial islands, disinformation campaigns, trade

³³ Aoi, C., Futamura, M. y Patalano, A. (2018) "Introduction 'hybrid warfare' in Asia: its meaning and shape", *The Pacific Review*, 31(6), pp. 693–713. doi: 10.1080/09512748.2018.1513548.

restrictions, or coercive diplomacy are examples of hybrid tactics that seek to alter the regional balance without firing a single shot.

As Clausewitz notes, war is the continuation of politics by other means. In this case, politics itself has evolved: confrontation has shifted to the economic, technological, and informational domains, where the use of force is replaced by the threat of its use.



Figure 4. Modified model of the Clausewitzian Trinity. Source: Military Review. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/Spanish/MilitaryReview_20151231_art009SPA.pdf

The mistake of some analysts, therefore, lies in viewing hybrid conflict merely as a more complex version of conventional war. In reality, its essence resides in adaptability: the ability to combine instruments of power in varying degrees and intensities to pressure the adversary without triggering escalation.

From this perspective, the concepts of irregular warfare or strategic competition do not fully capture the current reality of the Indo-Pacific. Both are elements within a broader hybrid framework, where the objective is not to destroy the rival, but to condition it.

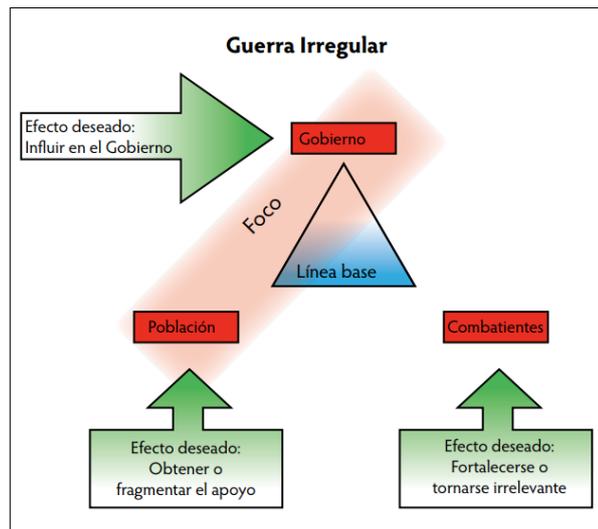


Figure 5. Focus of irregular warfare on the elements of the Clausewitzian trinity. Fuente: Military Review. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/Spanish/MilitaryReview_20151231_art009SPA.pdf

Unlike irregular warfare, which emphasises the population and the government, hybrid conflict acts upon all three vertices of the Clausewitzian trinity—the armed forces, political power, and civil society—albeit with lower intensity, so as not to cross the threshold of open war.

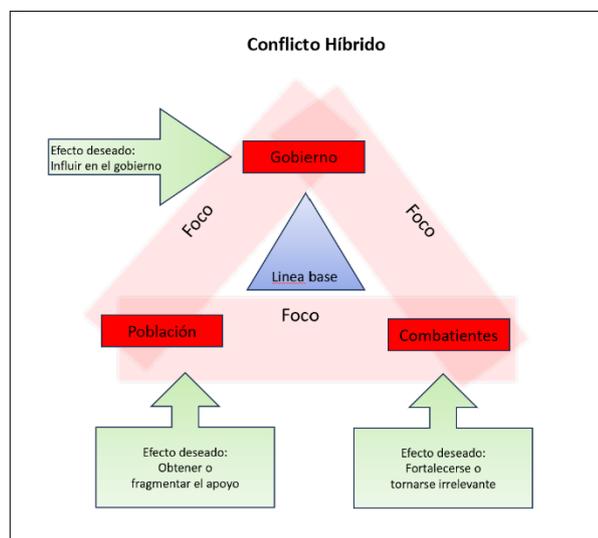


Figure 6. Focus of hybrid conflict on the elements of the clausewitzian trinity. Fuente: Author's own elaboration.

Therefore, the situation in the Indo-Pacific meets the criteria of hybridity defined by European doctrine when examined through the Clausewitzian lens. China and the United States deploy a coordinated set of military, economic, diplomatic, and technological

In short, this is a structural hybrid conflict that redefines the forms of power and strategy in the 21st century.

Spain before the Indo-Pacific Chessboard

Although Spain is not a leading actor in the Indo-Pacific region, the country observes closely how the rivalry between the United States and China is reshaping the global balance. Its role is discreet but not irrelevant.

Spanish foreign policy aligns with the strategy of the European Union, which seeks to maintain a balanced position: to promote economic cooperation with China without compromising its commitment to Western security and defence. The Elcano Institute notes that bilateral relations with Beijing focus on commercial cooperation within the limits set by Brussels³⁴.

Spain also participates in various European initiatives aimed at fostering stability in the Asia-Pacific, although its practical influence remains limited due to its historical priority towards Latin America, the Mediterranean, and the Maghreb³⁵. Nevertheless, its projection towards Asia is in a phase of growth, particularly in technological and business sectors.

Relations with the United States, on the other hand, continue to be a fundamental pillar of Spanish foreign policy. However, recent years have revealed visible tensions between the two governments. Differences over defence spending or the approach to certain international conflicts have caused diplomatic friction^{36,37}. Even so, bilateral cooperation

³⁴ Esteban, M. (2023) "Una mirada hacia el futuro de las relaciones entre España y China". Instituto Elcano, 3 de abril. Retrieved from: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/una-mirada-hacia-el-futuro-de-las-relaciones-entre-espana-y-china/> [Accesed: 24-09-2025].

³⁵ González, J. (2025). "Análisis | España mira al Indo-Pacífico: diplomacia, seguridad marítima y oportunidades económicas". The Diplomat Spain, 18 de septiembre. Retrieved from: <https://thediplotainspain.com/2025/09/18/analisis-espana-mira-al-indo-pacifico-diplomacia-seguridad-maritima-y-oportunidades-economicas/> [Accesed: 24-09-2025].

³⁶ Vidal, M. (2025) "Estados Unidos expresa su "preocupación" por las medidas del gobierno de Sánchez para elevar la presión sobre Israel". El País, 10 de septiembre. Retrieved from: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-09-10/estados-unidos-expresa-su-preocupacion-por-las-medidas-del-gobierno-de-sanchez-para-elevar-la-presion-sobre-israel.html> [Accesed: 24-09-2025].

³⁷ Iniguez, J. (2025) "Pedro Sánchez y Donald Trump: una relación institucional de 3 años marcada por el gasto en la defensa". Euronews, 26 de junio. Retrieved from: <https://es.euronews.com/2025/06/26/pedro-sanchez-donald-trump-una-relacion-institucional-de-3-anos-marcada-por-el-gasto-en-la> [Accesed: 24-09-2025].

in security and defence remains solid, anchored in the NATO framework and in long-term strategic convergence.

Despite these nuances, Spain's presence in the Indo-Pacific follows the European logic: contributing to stability, strengthening multilateral governance, and ensuring freedom of navigation. As Salarich points out, its foreign policy combines prudence and pragmatism, with a growing interest in expanding technological, economic, and maritime cooperation in Asia³⁸.

In short, Spain remains an active observer and moderate collaborator in the Indo-Pacific scenario, aware that its own security and prosperity also depend on the stability of this strategic region.

Conclusions: the new frontier of hybrid power

The analysis of the conflict between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific reveals a profound transformation in the nature of power. It is no longer solely about tanks and fleets, but about influence, technology, and narrative control. Both powers employ every resource of the state —economic, diplomatic, technological, and military— to assert dominance without resorting to open warfare.

According to the definition of the European Parliament's Research Service, the relationship between Washington and Beijing fully fits the concept of hybrid conflict. Military intimidation, economic pressure, coercive diplomacy, and technological competition form an interwoven web of synchronised actions intended to alter the regional balance without crossing the threshold into direct confrontation.

Analysing contemporary conflicts through the lens of classical thinkers such as Clausewitz allows us to understand this reality from a theoretical standpoint. Classical conceptions of war, adapted to the challenges of the 21st century, help to interpret how states channel political will through non-conventional means. War is no longer fought solely on battlefields but across supply chains, cyberspace, and public opinion.

³⁸ Salarich, J. (2022) "La política exterior de España con Asia-Pacífico". Instituto Elcano, 16 de enero. Retrieved from: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-politica-exterior-de-espana-con-asia-pacifico/> [Accessed: 24-09-2025].

Hybrid conflict thus redefines the notion of security. The frontier between peace and confrontation has become blurred, and states must develop new instruments of defence grounded in versatility, international cooperation, and innovation.

Spain —and, by extension, Europe— cannot remain indifferent to this evolution. In an environment where geopolitical competition unfolds across multiple dimensions, the capacity for adaptation will be as vital as traditional military strength.

The hybrid struggle between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific is not an isolated episode but a mirror of the world to come: a scenario in which influence is exercised without declaring war, yet with the same intensity with which battles were once fought.

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