

## The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Implications for the Stability of the South China Sea

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### ABSTRACT

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This research analyzes some of the political and military intentions of the United States (US) in South China Sea (SCS), the hard contested region of substantial geopolitical, economic, and strategic significance. Preserving the freedom of passage in a heavily traversed maritime trade route stands as a crucial imperative for the US, thereby ensuring the uninterrupted flow of international trade. Abundant natural resources, such as oil reserves and fisheries, also attract US attention. The motivation behind this quest arises from the recognition of the significant role played by global market stability and the endorsement of states' privileges to independently harness their resources. This research investigates the geopolitical dimension of the United States' policy to counter China's assertive territorial claims. The article emphasizes the importance of the US military presence and relationships in the area, highlighting their important role in the security-oriented Indo-Pacific Strategy.

**Keywords:** South China Sea (SCS), United States, China, Indo-Pacific Strategy

### Introduction

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Since the beginning of the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US and China have been engaged in a strategic competition with fluctuating intensity. This rivalry has become a significant and constant factor at contemporary global political scene. Recent international diplomacy trends indicate that the Sino-US relationship has always been difficult for both sides and the global community owing to its repercussions (Olli Pekka Suorsa, 2020). China is rapidly rising on the geopolitical landscape exerting itself on international affairs. Under leadership of President Xi Jinping, Chinese economy has flourished, and the country's influence has grown substantially. President Biden mentioned China's ambitions to become the leading political and economic force during his first news conference in March 2021. The relationship has attracted huge diplomatic interest in last few decades. Intense competition in multiple domains including politics, economy, culture, power, and security has characterized the relationship between these two countries.

Southeast Asia is an important playground in global trade routes due to its location on the southeast coast of the Eurasian continent, near the Indian and the Pacific Ocean and rich in natural resources. Many countries' geopolitical interests intersect in this area, making it a critical hub for major powers like the US, Russia, China, Japan, and India. Due to its strategic location, distinctive natural resources, and economic potentials, the region has long been a concern to a number of nations, notably China and the US.

Although most ASEAN governments have shown a lack of awareness or recognition, the Sino-US confrontation is anticipated to influence Southeast Asia considerably. Intensity of Sino-US competition has fluctuated since the end of the Cold War and this has been a driving factor in international affairs. The United States has been a significant player, influencing and defining various facets of the global system. China, nevertheless, has risen to prominence as a world power, amplifying its impact and making an ever-greater impression on global events (Shambaugh, 2018).

Therefore, this paper examines the geopolitical aspects of the US policy in dealing with China's territorial claims and their assertion in the region. This article also highlights the significance of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which is focused on security, by stressing the role played by the US military in the region.

### **Literature review**

The study analyzes the main issues and viewpoints in the scholarly discussions regarding the US approach to the SCS. It covers geopolitical strategies, legal interpretations, and diplomatic contexts. In "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence," Green and Hicks examine the strategic priorities for the US, highlighting the significance of

maintaining freedom of navigation and restricting Chinese expansionist ambitions (Shambaugh, 2018).

In "Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific," Kaplan explores the SCS and its strategic significance for US foreign policy. Concerns about Chinese rising power in the area are larger, and he links its significance to other problems. Much of the scholarly writings about the US strategy centers on its military and security aspects (Kaplan, 2014). US naval strength and power distribution are two aspects of US military strategy in the region that Kaplan analyzes in his research.

The US approach to the SCS is defined by alliances and diplomacy, according to "Indo-Pacific Empire". The article by Medcalf focuses on the US-ASEAN and ties with regional allies. Maintaining a power balance with China and fostering regional tranquility are the goals of this approach, which aims to address SCS concerns cohesively. Medcalf takes a strategic view of Indian Ocean and Western Pacific from the 'Indo-Pacific' angle. He claims that many nations, including the US, are adopting this approach to understand and counter China's growing capacity. He explores China's aspirations and tactics in the Indo-Pacific region, analyzing how Beijing's activities are transforming the local environment (Medcalf, 2020, pp. 100–120). Medcalf also examines the US reaction to China's ascent, encompassing political, economic, and military tactics.

The implementation of the Chinese 2023 Coast Guard Law and heightened maritime intrusions have changed U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy being used as a diplomatic model into a tangible instrument of curbing the coercive moves implemented by Beijing. Meanwhile, in 2024, the Indo-Pacific Strategy was rejuvenated by the "2024 National Security Strategy" of the Biden administration, which focuses on deterrence and alliance-building, including the AUKUS, QUAD, and large-scale naval exercises, both named Balikatan and Talisman Sabre respectively.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative and analytical research design grounded in political realism to investigate the strategic and military motivations driving the United States policy in the South China Sea (SCS). Utilizing the core tenets of classical realism; particularly Hans Morgenthau's emphasis on state behavior, national interest and the pursuit of power; this approach is suited to interpret how the U.S. attempts to balance against China's assertive territorial claims. By examining Washington's actions through a realist lens, the research evaluates how economic imperatives such as preserving freedom of navigation and military frameworks, like the Indo-Pacific Strategy, serve as essential

mechanisms to maintain a regional balance of power in an inherently anarchic international system.

The foundation for this qualitative analysis is built upon a diverse selection of primary and secondary open-source materials. Primary data is drawn directly from official government policy documents, including the U.S. Department of Defense reports and strategic frameworks, alongside maritime tracking intelligence from prominent regional monitoring initiatives. This is supplemented by secondary data comprising peer-reviewed academic journals, historical case studies and defense policy analyses from international relations think tanks. Through thematic content analysis approach, these collected materials are categorized into distinct strategic vectors: economic security, resource competition and military alliance building. This systematic approach maps out the evolving dynamics relating to the US, China and other states in the region.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The idealist view of international politics, which Morgenthau vehemently opposes, holds that a morally directed political structure based on abstract ideals should be put into place. He contrasts this with proponents of "political realism," who look at international affairs through the prism of human nature (Gooch, 1947). Morgenthau is widely acknowledged as a seminal figure in the domain of International Relations because of the enduring influence his writings continue to have on the contemporary understanding of world politics. The author's interpretation of realism in foreign policy underscores the importance of a country's foreign policy aligning with its national interest and the dynamic international environment. In "Politics among Nations", Morgenthau offers a comprehensive examination of the framework of international relations and the notion of national interests (Richard, L. 2007, pp. 91–127). The work emphasizes the quest for power and authority while categorizing the reasoning behind this undertaking as a benchmark. He acknowledges political realism as a substantial element of global politics, encompassing concurrent cooperation and conflict. It is antithetical to idealism and liberalism, both of which emphasize cooperation. He considers realism to be a valuable instrument for formulating policies (Guzzini, 2018).

Besides the realist view, another useful analytical model of the strategic competition between the United States and China in the South China Sea is offered by the concept of Gray Zone strategy. Gray Zone strategies are the actions of competition that are not considered traditional warfare but are being purposefully used to achieve strategic objectives in the political, economic, military, informational and diplomatic arena. In *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*, Morris et al. (2019) state that modern great

power competition is increasingly also being fought through indirect and non-conventional means that are intended to avoid direct military confrontation and subtle but steady shift of the power balance in the region.

Both China and the United States are using Gray Zone tactics to enhance their strategic power in the South China Sea. The United States has been using Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), military deployments, regional partnerships, and joint military exercises to help halt China's footprint in the region and bolster a rules-based regional order (Guzzini, 2018). At the same time, China uses maritime militia forces, coast guard patrols, economic pressure and the building of artificial islands to secure its territorial claims without initiating armed confrontation with the U.S.

### **The United States' Strategic Interests and Alliance Partnership in SCS**

United States has substantial interests in the SCS region and is trying to maintain its current grand strategy in East Asia. This strategy prioritizes two derivative interests: ensuring US security by safeguarding its allies, and promoting US prosperity through open trade, investment, and economic growth in the region (Avey et al., 2018).

Prioritizing the safety of American allies is a top priority for the US, the manifestation of this interest is visible through the treaties that the US has signed with South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. Also, the general public believes that the US would protect Taiwan from an unprovoked assault, even though the US has not officially promised to do so (Glaser, 2015), whether Taiwan implicates security threat to the United States or not is a contentious issue. While some scholars see it as mainly a political motivated ideological concern, others argue that safeguarding Taiwan is vital for maintaining American credibility in the area or that US military primacy would be jeopardized if China controlled the island (Tucker & Glaser, 2011). Furthermore, the US capacity to safeguard the Philippines and Taiwan is contingent upon its access to the SCS. Furthermore, The US is often acknowledged to have interest in safeguarding the regional order in East Asia, with particular emphasis on United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) (Tucker & Glaser, 2011). UNCLOS also includes laws that support the US to enhance its capacity to safeguard its partners and promote global marine standards, such as the rights to freedom of navigation and over flight (O'Rourke & Shifrinson, 2022).

During times of peace, the US military ability to enter the SCS is very advantageous for the purpose of practicing its naval and aviation capabilities, engaging in training exercises with alliances, collecting information through ISR missions, moving to other areas of operation, and showcasing its commitment to the region (Best, 2005). The accessibility of these waters,

along with the dedication to maintaining their accessibility, is crucial for the economic success of the area. This success is mostly dependent on maritime transportation, which encompasses trade between Southeast and Northeast Asian nations allied with the United States.

The exact ramifications of these rules determine their significance and the level of US concern for the rule-based order. Firstly, the usefulness of these hinges on the US commitment to engage and gain an advantageous position in military domain in the SCS. As China enhances its Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, the US capacity to deploy surface vessels and planes in the SCS during a major conflict with China would become excessively risky, particularly in the northern region (Gholz et al., 2019). Consequently, this would diminish the strategic significance of conducting military drills in that area. Additionally, military maneuvers require comparable activities to be effective. Secondly, exercises from the Philippine Sea would show the US commitment to military activities in the eastern SCS.

In times of peace, a common understanding of these rights can decrease the occurrence of military accidents, prevent the emergence of political pressures when the US deploys naval fleets in the SCS, and mitigate crises between Chinese and other claimant states. All of these considerations decrease the chance of a US led war. The SCS dispute is an example of how regulations can cause conflict when they are not understood.

### **Security Dilemma and Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific**

The evolving strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region reflects a classic security dilemma in which the defensive measures adopted by one state are perceived as offensive threats by another, thereby intensifying regional insecurity. The United States' military and strategic involvement in the region, including AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, has greatly altered the region's power dynamics. The efforts focus on bolstering maritime security, bolstering deterrence and resisting China's growing presence in the Indo Pacific region. But from Beijing's point of view, these deals are an attempt to contain China in a strategic way and restrict its influence in the region.

China has also responded to the growing strategic framework led by the United States by boosting its economic and geopolitical engagement efforts, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The frameworks allow China to further integrate its economy with regional nations, and boost its political and strategic power in Asia. As China continues to make significant investments in infrastructure projects, trade connectivity, and economic integration in the Indo-Pacific, it has become a key economic power in the region.

This has compelled a lot of regional states to experience a strategic difficulty. Some nations like Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Australia want to seek security cooperation from the USA in order to counter the rising military assertiveness of China in the South China Sea. Some countries like Japan, Philippines, Vietnam and Australia want security cooperation from the USA to offset China's increasing military assertiveness in the South China Sea. However, this is not the case at a macro level, as these states continue to be economically reliant on China, despite their distance, because of their close trade and investment ties with China and the extent of regional economic integration. The result is a precarious strategic situation that is fragile because regional players try to strike a balance between security ties with the United States and economic ties with China. As a result, the Indo-Pacific has become a more competitive geopolitical landscape of strategic uncertainty, military modernization, and escalating great power rivalry.

### **US Concerns Over Island's Military Bases**

The Spratly Islands may not hold significant value for US in terms of their features. However, the access to resources in SCS, such as fish and oil, holds importance for US allies. This is particularly true for countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, which have increasing energy needs and thriving domestic fishing industries. The security concerns of US regarding military establishment of China emanate as Chinese activities affect the measures which US could take to prevent regional escalation against its partners and allies.

The military challenges that the US currently confronts primarily stem from China's ongoing military expansion and modernization efforts, which encompass the development of regional power projection capabilities. Chinese A2/AD capabilities are limiting the US' ability to fight a big war near Chinese shoreline, notably in the northern SCS. It restricts US entry into Northeast Asia through the SCS.

There is a debate over how dangerous these new capabilities are perceived by the US. China's rising military capabilities don't entirely undermine the US capacity to defend its Northeast Asian allies, notably South Korea and Japan. These capabilities make it harder for the US to meet its regional military obligations. Chinese military up gradation has reduced the US's Taiwan conflict capability. Furthermore, China's naval buildup has increased its influence in the SCS (Erickson, 2020).

There are four potential situations in which US interests would be involved: trade disruption, a war related to Taiwan, war between the US and Chinese over a Spratly islands, and conflict between Chinese and a regional state without US involvement (Erickson, 2020). Moreover, it will also take into

account the effect on China's capacity to safeguard a stronghold for its SSBNs (Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles) in the SCS.

### US Military Capabilities and Deployment of Forces in SCS

The United States has been progressively demonstrating its military strength in the South China Sea by carrying out "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPs) near the Nansha Islands and encroaching against the territorial seas of the Zhongjian Island. China has expressed worries about these operations, with some optimistically believing that they do not impede China's actions in constructing islands and reefs, while others perceive them as a substantial military pressure on China (SCSPI, 2024).

Figure-1



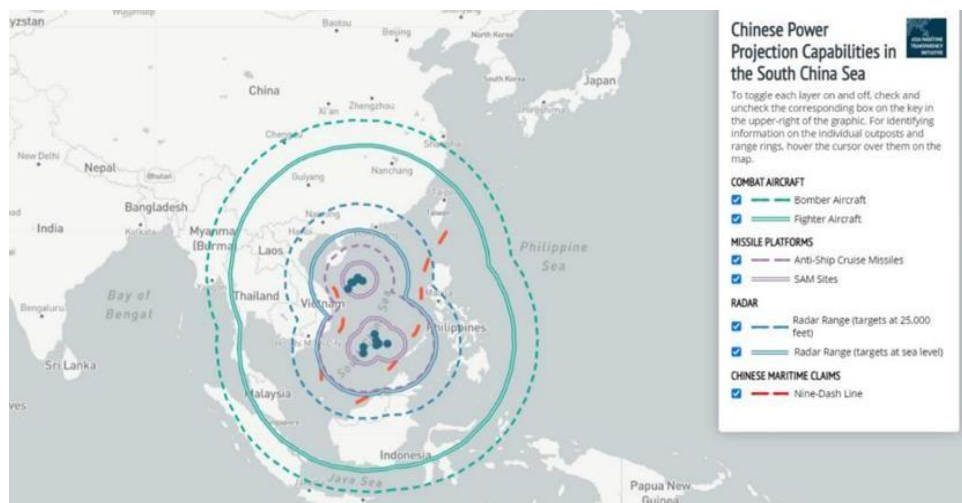
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The US military actions in the South China Sea are perceived as strategic maneuvers aimed at raising the concerns for China's efforts to protect its sovereignty. These operations employ a combination of military, political, diplomatic, and media tactics. The recent Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) conducted in the South China Sea were highly unusual. The US military by purpose leaked specific information about the operations to the media and encouraged them to sensationalize them (SCSPI, 2024). The utilization of sophisticated armaments, along with widespread media attention, has resulted in attracting the participation of the general populace and governmental entities in both the United States and China.

U.S. naval forces deployed two amphibious ready groups (ARGs) - the USS Makin Island and the USS America - and three carrier strike groups (CSGs) in 2023 to bolster strategic military operations in the SCS. The Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs) carried out six operations, specifically focusing on the Vanguard Basin and the shipping routes. Meanwhile, the Amphibious Readiness Groups (ARGs), operating under the Lightning carrier concept, coordinated operations with F35B aircraft to enhance their overall capacity (SCSPI, 2024). In addition, the US Navy deployed a total of 11 nuclear and two ballistic missile submarines, regularly making their operating status known to the public. Simultaneously, the US Air Force carried out 30 missions using bombers, operating from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam and several airports in friendly and partner nations.

The United States also intensified its close-range surveillance operations, conducting almost 1,000 airborne missions and 314 days of naval reconnaissance in the South China Sea. Reconnaissance operations in the vicinity of the Paracel and Spratly Islands escalated, resulting in numerous detached engagements with Chinese personnel. In addition, the United States expanded its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to a total of six. However, the number of US warships transiting through the Taiwan Strait reduced, although these transits involved a variety of naval units and cooperative operations with Canada (SCSPI, 2024). Significant improvements in military collaboration with allied nations, specifically the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, were observed, including joint military exercises, coordination of policies and sales of weapons. Notably, unmanned aircraft were deployed and space-based reconnaissance networks were constructed. The United States carried out 107 extensive exercises and drills in the area (CRS, 2024), with a focus on using unmanned combat systems and strategically relocating to the Western Pacific.

Figure - 2



*Reprinted from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024*

Chinese experts assert that the United States military significantly escalated its presence in the South China Sea last year, with extensive military exercises and heightened spy plane operations. This development is seen as a threat to China's security interests and raises the likelihood of tensions in the region (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

It has not stationed fighter squadrons at the advance operational sites located at Mischief, Subi reefs and Fiery Cross. China also has not established contiguous baselines around the Spratly Islands, despite expressing its intention to do so. Chinese government has refrained from using its economic influence to actively end the US alliance with Philippine or restrict US military access to other countries in the SCS and has refrained from impeding or obstructing maritime trade.

In order to assert its rights without resorting to military conflict, Chinese have used "gray zone" entities, like China Coast Guard and marine militia. They have temporarily halted its efforts in the SCS in response to heightened US opposition, particularly after the 2010 ASEAN Forum and the completion of China's reclamation of land in late 2015.

In 2023, the U.S. also increased the scope and intensity of its military actions in the SCS and elsewhere in Southeast Asia's waters: aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and tactical reconnaissance. Activities such as combined exercises with allies, have also raised Chinese concerns. As reported by the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative SCSPI, while there were approximately a thousand reconnaissance takeoffs near Chinese airspace and

frequent maritime operations from the US side, it could be seen that the US was defying China (SCSPI, 2024). Also, the United States military has advanced its efforts to invest in, develop, and expand its presence at five bases in the Philippines (Chavez, 2024). Additionally, it intends to establish four new bases, with three of them strategically located near Taiwan. The Recent exercises of Balikatan 2024 are also considered as part of U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty by strengthening military collaboration and preparedness between the two militaries (Manila, 2024).

Besides bilateral interactions, the United States increased its multilateral defense posture in the Indo-Pacific in 2023-2025. Washington also concluded fresh access arrangements with the Philippines under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), on which the U.S. forces are granted access on a rotational basis to nine bases, among them those that are strategically positioned along the Taiwan coast and along the South China Sea. The United States and Japan signed a roadmap in defense in 2024, enhancing joint command interoperability and missile defense. The AUKUS alliance also started an implementation cycle, as Australia was affirming that it would purchase Virginia-class submarines by 2030 and set up combined training installations in Perth. In addition, the QUAD partners, India, Japan, Australia and the U.S., carried out their biggest-ever Malabar naval drills in 2024, an indication that there is increased coordination to deal with the rising Chinese presence in the region. All these indicate a tendency of consolidated deterrence and collective security orientation based on the preservation of regional stability by common strategic goals.

Furthermore, US has deployed three Combat Support Groups (CSGs), two Amphibious Readiness Groups (ARGs), Two ballistic nuclear missile submarines and eleven nuclear attack submarines are deployed for strategic cruise missions in the Western Pacific, which encompasses the South China Sea (SCSPI, 2024). These military assets present a military threat for China in SCS as military threat is combination of enemy capability and its intentions. The US has declared China as a challenge and its rival in National Security Strategy since 2017 (Lippert & Perthes, 2020), hence any US military presence in SCS is rightly considered as threat by the Chinese.

Figure - 3



*Reprinted from USNI News, U.S. Naval Institute, 2024*

The U. S. Navy is already effectively challenging China's aggression, expansion in the SCS and the surrounding areas through the use of force and FONOPS (USNI News, 2024). Recently in 2024 USS Blue Ridge (LCC-19), which is the command ship of the US 7th Fleet is in the South China Sea after a visit to a Vietnamese port, making a show of force on water that is still a bone of contention. The USS America (LHA-6) is currently conducting normal operations in the adjacent Philippine Sea, proving the U. S presence and determination to safeguard its allied partners (USNI News, 2024). These deployments, furthermore, coupled with the combined exercises with regional associates, aim to restrain Chinese expansionism in these seas for unobstructed trade navigation to proceed smoothly.

### **US-China Conflict on Spratly Island**

The US and China engage in a territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands. The 2015 RAND research presents a hypothetical situation: a conflict arises between the US and China due to a disagreement over oil and gas resources (Nixon et al., 1996). As a result, China takes control of an island, and the US chooses to remove China's forces from this region. The most politically significant scenario in which the US and China engage in a conflict over a specific feature in the Spratly Islands would occur if the islands were under the control of the Philippines, which is an ally of the United States.

There are two possible scenarios to consider: one where China just uses military stationed in Spratly Islands, and other where China also utilizes forces positioned on region. As previously mentioned, the US has the capability to eliminate the military personnel stationed on Chinese facilities in the Spratly Islands with a moderate-scale offensive. While the US would ultimately emerge as the victor, it is important to note that this conflict would not be insignificant in scale (Nixon et al., 2015). The US assault would result in the demise of a certain quantity of China's military men stationed on these islands and potentially on China's surface vessels. In order to mitigate the chances of further escalation, the US might specifically focus its military actions on the Chinese soldiers involved in attack, while refraining from launching strikes on Spratly military buildups (Al Jazeera, 2017).

Figure - 4



*Al Jazeera, CIA Factbook*

There are other pathways by which a confrontation of broader magnitude, with forces headquartered in mainland China, could emerge. China has the option to utilize these forces while the US is overpowering its forces stationed in Spratly or incorporate mainland forces in its early operations. As an alternative, the US could choose to increase its strikes on mainland bases in anticipation of Chinese retaliatory actions. Like the previous conflict, the US is likely to win this one, especially with newly deployed forces (Sacks, 2022).

The main distinction between the Taiwan situation, where China has the potential to overcome US military troops, and the Spratly situation lies in geographical factors. The Spratly Islands are farther from China's mainland bases and US in Northeast Asia than Taiwan. Therefore, disregarding China's military bases in the SCS, the US chances of success in a Spratly Islands

situation would be significantly higher compared to Taiwan situation and rather optimistic. Despite the significant modernization and expansion of the PLAN surface fleet, in 2025 the US Navy intends to acquire over 1,600 anti-ship missiles, such as Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile, the SM-6 missile and Naval Strike Missile (Larter, 2020). Additionally, the US Navy plans to enhance the anti-ship capability of all its Tomahawk missiles.

However, if China persists in allocating resources to enhance its troops within its mainland, it is projected that by around 2030, the PLA could achieve regional / temporary dominance in the air and naval domains at the outset of military engagements. While the United States would ultimately emerge victorious in this situation, achieving success would likely require prolonged military engagement and substantial casualties (Nixon et al., 2015).

Furthermore, China's recent enforcement of its territorial disputes and aggressive militarization has raised the stakes. The US FONOP's has also triggered China's maritime claims and risks of escalation. Hence, US could potentially be drawn into direct confrontation with China if China challenges US military in SCS or US allies in the region.

### **Credibility Options for the US**

The U.S perceives assertive activities of China in the SCS as a threat to the security interests of the U.S. This is because these policies create circumstances that necessitate a response from the U.S. in order to maintain its credibility and military supremacy. If the U.S. fails to resist Chinese desires to dominate the SCS, China may perceive a lack of determination to protect its East Asian interests. China may believe the U.S. is less committed to preserving SCS allies, Taiwan, and, most significantly, dissolving its East Asian links and exiting the region. To attain regional dominance, China may pursue more active diplomatic and military policies (Henry, 2020).

However, China would engage if they believe a movement in the US posture in the SCS suggesting a change that also affects U.S. decisions. The primary significant transformation is the altering distribution of power, particularly the escalating military capabilities of China in East Asia. If Chinese authorities perceive that their increasing military capabilities have led to a decrease in the United States' obligations in the SCS, it is logical for them to anticipate a decline in the United States' credibility in safeguarding its allies.

While it is understandable to have concerns about the credibility of US, it is not necessary for US to considerably compromise its resistance to China's attempts to control the SCS in order to maintain its credibility. The US has the capability to break the crucial connection between SCS claims and its allies due to the significant differences in the range of U.S. interests in East Asia

albeit serious challenges (Henry, 2020). As an initial measure, if the US chooses to reduce its military opposition to Chinese efforts to dominate SCS, it should explicitly communicate to both China and its allies that it prioritizes safeguarding its allies (and thwarting Chinese regional dominance) to a significantly greater extent than safeguarding states' territorial assertions in the SCS.

To mitigate the potential risks of challenging China's efforts to dominate the SCS, the US should undertake measures to strengthen its obligations to its allies in Northeast Asia. This includes preserving and enhancing its military capabilities specifically aimed at safeguarding its allies. Furthermore, the US has the ability to enhance the coordination of strategic planning, military exercises, and intelligence exchange with its crucial allies as the US has resorted to a number of such measures like. This would serve to both reassure them and exhibit a firm determination towards China. In addition, the establishment of recent security agreements like 2021 trilateral security pact among Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS) can serve as evidence that the U.S. is intensifying its dedication to safeguard its crucial interests in East Asia, rather than diminishing them by signing security pact in the region including QUAD, LAMOA, COMCASA etc (Castillo & Downes, 2020).

However, during global financial crisis of 2008, China performed better than US, which was a significant sign of decreased US prosperity, capability, and influence. Therefore, while interdependence of credibility logic is robust, the attempts made by the US to maintain its credibility may not achieve complete success. Hence, despite the U.S. implementing steps to safeguard its credibility, there will still be a certain level of risk involved (Pu & Wang, 2018).

Failure by the US to safeguard the territorial and maritime rights of its partners in the SCS could result in the loss of those claims and rights. The US however, would not incur any direct losses. The US runs the risk of its allies and partners doubting its reliability in safeguarding their crucial interests, such as their homelands and economy, if it does not adequately protect their economic interests and sovereignty in the SCS (Pu & Wang, 2018). This could potentially undermine or even dismantle these partnerships, so compromising US security. China poses significant problems to Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia. The US choice to abstain from assisting in countering these problems may generate skepticism among other nations with territorial or economic interests in the SCS, as well as among US allies beyond Southeast Asia, particularly Japan. The interconnection of credibility logic establishes correlation between US actions regarding the SCS and its trustworthiness with allies and partners. Moreover, US is unequivocally the most superior security

choice accessible to these nations, a factor that is likely and greatly enhances the US chances of maintaining its partnerships (Castillo & Downes, 2020).

Establishing credibility with the Philippines poses a significant challenge due to its insistence on the US providing clarification over the inclusion of the Philippines' SCS claims under the mutual defense pact (Akita, 2019). Furthermore, the United States' historically erratic focus on the region has raised uncertainties regarding the scope of its interests and obligations, thus enhancing China's prospects (Shambaugh, 2018). China has expanded its influence in the region by establishing strong trade connections with numerous South East Asian nations. ASEAN has become Chinese main trading partner, surpassing both the U.S. and the EU (Shambaugh, 2018). China has utilized this economic leverage to assert its own interests and mitigate the political consequences of its aggressive behavior. The inconsistent prioritizing of US in the region partly stems from its perception that South East Asia has a minimal impact on US security (Zhang, 2018).

### **China's Strategic Perspective on the Indo-Pacific**

For China, a US Indo-Pacific Strategy is a more comprehensive geopolitical move to counter China's rise and curb its growing presence in the Asia-Pacific. In Beijing's view, the growing U.S. military deployment and building up of strategic alliances and partnerships is a form of "encirclement" aimed at challenging China's national security and regional ambitions. Mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS are seen to be contributing to bloc politics and escalating tensions in the region, often by Chinese policymakers.

China also has grave misgivings about US involvement in sensitive geopolitical matters like Taiwan and the disputed areas of the Spratly Islands. Beijing regards the US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and military patrolling in the waters claimed by it as infringement of its sovereignty and strategic security. Besides, the growing military alliances and defense cooperation in China's maritime zone are seen by the Chinese as efforts to block China's strategic flexibility and military progress. Such worries have fueled tension and increased arms buildup in the South China Sea.

In China's eyes, the militarization of artificial islands and the strengthening of maritime powers is defensive and geared towards the protection of territorial sovereignty, maritime trade routes and national interests. China asserts the historical claims and the country's security interests, and the need to secure sea lines of communication that are crucial for the country's economic development. China, at the same time, has been building a regional influence by using its economic diplomacy, investment into infrastructures, and

connectivity initiatives of the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing's actions aim to bolster regional economic integration and establish itself as a key economic and strategic power in the Indo-Pacific.

### **The US's Calculated Response**

While the US will incorporate several components in its approach to the SCS, the fundamental decision it faces is the level of resistance it should exert against Chinese dominance in the region. The US must carefully consider the dangers and advantages associated with varying degrees of opposition to China's endeavors. The primary risk lies in the likelihood of a situation escalating into an armed conflict, which is contingent upon both the policies of the US and Chinese readiness to engage in combat. Furthermore, heightened U.S. opposition could exacerbate the already strained US-China relations. Intensifying U.S. pushback can enhance US integrity with China and its allies.

Prior to its heightened aggression in the last ten years, China adopted a gradual and consistent strategy to enhance its dominance in the SCS. However, as of 2022, Chinese have not taken any action to assert sovereignty over forty-five islets (approximately) and rocks that are now under the control of other countries. China has not taken any action to impose limitations or restrictions on foreign military boats passing through, patrolling, or conducting exercises in these areas. Additionally, China has not made any attempts to pressure coastal states into discontinuing their hosting of U.S. forces operating in the SCS. In addition, China has endeavored to enhance its dominance over the SCS primarily through utilization of its coast guard and marine militia troops.

In 2025, the Indo-Pacific Maritime Initiative further codified the sharing of information on the activity of the Chinese fleet by the allied forces through the sharing of data on a real-time basis. This development signifies the working of Washington to reformulate deterrence to go beyond naval activities which were considered more traditional, and instead be more technologically based, strategic signaling and multilateral coordination. The U.S. strategy focuses on the fact that stability in the South China Sea is not just a matter of achieving power balance but it is a matter of maintaining a networked order in the region, which is resilient to coercion.

However, due to the US interests in the SCS, the potential dangers of escalating military opposition would be unjustified. The presence of heightened obligations and firm boundaries may be perceived as a direct threat to China's claims of territorial sovereignty and its aspirations for status, potentially resulting in more assertive action from China. Moreover, these actions could exacerbate tensions between the US and China, prompting China to intensify its efforts to minimize the United States military influence from

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East Asia. Stronger obligations could also generate anticipations among the U.S. administration and populace that the U.S. ought to react to China's provocations (Thayer, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

The South China Sea (SCS) remains central to U.S. foreign policy due to its major strategic, economic, and security importance. Deft diplomatic maneuvering is needed to reduce tensions and resist China's influence. The U.S. aims to resist China's control over the region to protect free navigation, trade routes, and regional stability. Although there are risks of escalation and conflict, these are currently limited and align with U.S. objectives. The SCS is vital for global trade and resource access - its fisheries, oil, and gas are crucial for surrounding states. The U.S. emphasizes international law, cooperation, and freedom of navigation to ensure fair and predictable use of these waterways.

Geopolitically, the SCS is a key arena for maintaining U.S. influence in Asia and containing China's rise. Strong alliances with Japan, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian nations underpin regional security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. To manage tensions, the U.S. must engage in careful diplomacy, balancing deterrence with cooperation. Ultimately, an open, lawful, and secure Indo-Pacific supported by the U.S. allies and consistent with international norms remains the cornerstone of its strategy.

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