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China's Military Expansion in the South China Sea: Analysing its Implications for Global Maritime Security and Future Conflicts

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Abstract

The South China Sea is a significant trade route, a rich source of energy resources and geopolitically important region in the Indo Pacific region, which has become the one of the most contentious and strategic maritime zone in modern international politics. In the past few years, China's military presence has grown considerably, establishing artificial islands, modernizing its navy, militarizing its disputed territories and employing grey-zone tactics. The developments have escalated regional tensions and boosted strategic competition with the USA and other regional actors. The study investigates China's military presence in the South China Sea and its implications for global maritime security, regional stability, and the potential for future conflict. The article also examines how major powers and regional states are reacting to the assertive moves of China in the sea. The primary theoretical approach adopted in the study is Hegemonic Stability Theory to better understand the power shift and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. From a methodological standpoint, it is a qualitative research, secondary sources such as academic publications, government documents, policy documents, international law documents and think tank publications have been used to gather data. It has been found that China's military expansion has led to the militarization in the region, international maritime disputes, restrictions on freedom of navigation and increased geopolitical polarization in the Indo-Pacific. The research finds that if such diplomatic interaction and international cooperation is lacking, the South China Sea can easily become a flash point between major regional and global power struggles down the road.

Keywords: *Freedom of Navigation, Global Maritime Security, Hegemonic Stability Theory, Indo-Pacific, South China Sea.*

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) is strategically of immense value to the global maritime trade and security covering an area of more than 3.5 million square kilometers and used in almost a third of world shipping. It is a very important trade route between East Asia, Europe, and the Americas and is endowed with invaluable resources like oil, gas, and fisheries. Geopolitical tensions have sharply intensified in the region as several countries have been contesting over the territory of

the region, with China being the main one to contend with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The core of these conflicts is the fact that most of the SCS is claimed by China using the so-called Nine-Dash Line, which is common to the claims of a number of Southeast Asian countries. This conflict has intensified with the expansion of the military activities of China in the region through the building of military bases and militarization of the disputed islands, which has increased the worry of the region and the world at large in relation to the security and stability of the Asia-Pacific (Zhao, 2025).

The increase in military presence in the South China Sea by China is one of the causes of escalating tensions in the region. China has been developing some of the reefs and islands into military bases within the last ten years equipping them with airstrips, a defence against missiles and radar bases. Such activities have not only cast concerns among the Southeast Asian countries who are having their sovereignty rights dispute but also among the world superpowers such as the United States, which has been adamant in ensuring freedom of passage in the Gulf. U.S. has also held regular naval drills in the SCS as a way of asserting its position on the international law and safeguarding critical shipping routes. China has also maintained its aggressive position in the region despite a 2016 decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration that refused payment to the territorial claims of the country, which has caused greater threat of confrontation and destabilization (Singh, 2019).

The importance of the military buildup of China in the South China Sea is not just limited to issues of security in the region but instead has an international impact on the maritime trade, international law and the balance of power. Since the actions undertaken by China towards the SCS have the potential to set norms and laws, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it is important to examine how these have been impacted not only to the countries of Southeast Asia but also to the other key international players, including the U.S., Japan, and ASEAN. This paper will examine the existence of any geopolitical and security risks presented by the Chinese military buildup, the reactions of the world powers, as well as the overall ramifications of this to the maritime security of the world in general. By so doing, it aims at adding to a greater comprehension of how the South China Sea war may define the future international relations and security relations (Useynova & Ahmad, 2025).

"China's Maritime Geography and Its Naval Expansion" (2025), Leszek Buszynski analyses the developments of the increasing naval strength of China and its strategic maritime interests especially in South China Sea and in the wider Indo-Pacific region. The paper examines how China has transformed into a maritime power, notwithstanding the fact that it is a continental power, due to its aim of gaining control of the crucial sea routes, claiming territories and gaining influence. Buszynski brings out the modernization of the Chinese naval fleet and how they strategically use geography of the sea to deliver their power beyond China. The paper also evaluates the geopolitical consequences of such expansion of the naval forces particularly the relations of the United States and China concerning the neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, the paper is more inclined at the military and security issues, and the economic, environmental and legal consequences of Chinese naval operations have not been thoroughly investigated. Future studies might examine the socio-economic repercussions on Southeast Asia, relevance of international law arrangements such as UNCLOS and efficacy of regional security alliances in equalizing the increasing naval strength of China (Buszynski, 2025).

"China's Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan" by Pei-Shan Kao (2025) examines how China is using the South China Sea as a strategic economic zone that is intricately linked to the overall development goals of this country under the Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI). Kao claims that the marine strategy of China is a militaristic approach but at the same time it is also economically motivated and serves the interests of improving trade connectivity, energy route protection, as well as developing maritime industries including shipping, port infrastructures, and exploitation of marine natural resources. The paper contextualizes the 14th Five-year Plan of China into this maritime economic context and the way in which the policies are made to take advantage of the SCS as a vehicle of economic development and strengthening the geopolitical position of China. Kao also addresses the strains caused by such a dualist endeavour to achieve economic growth and strategic domination, observing the frustrations involved in counterclaiming such opportunities, and the imposition of international law and local opposition. The article helps to comprehend the ways economic strategies merge with geopolitical aspirations in the SCS policy of China, but mainly it focuses on the economic objectives aimed at on the state level and does not provide much information about the socio-environmental effects of marine development on the locality and the reactions of littoral communities and the ASEAN economies to the strategies (Kao, 2025).

"China's Challenge to the International Law of the Sea in context of South China Sea Problem", Vildan Meydan (2025) discusses the dynamic that eventually occurs between the conduct of China and the international legal framework, specifically the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The paper analyses whether China as the most influential claimant state in the region adheres to the relevant legal norms or acts selectively to enforce the international law to support its expansive maritime claims and to enhance its control over the disputed waters. Meydan emphasizes the pragmatic course of China, neither complying, nor being a revisionist--but rather showing how Beijing can use the legal instruments to legitimize the claims it makes and avoids undesirable interpretations of its actions, including the 2016 arbitration verdict. The article places the Chinese legal approach in the context of the larger geopolitical contest, demonstrating how the Chinese position makes it difficult to solve the conflict using the law and the inability of international law agencies to protect the rights of weaker coastal states. Nevertheless, the legal positioning and state-level strategies of China are the main areas of the study, and less emphasis is given on the impact of these legal issues on the regional implementation of maritime norms, the involvement of the global actors in law, and the overall impact of law of the sea in practice development (Meydan, 2025).

Problem Statement

The South China Sea has become a focal point of escalating geopolitical tensions, primarily due to China's military expansion and its growing influence in the region. This expansion has significant implications for global maritime security, with potential threats to freedom of navigation, international trade routes, and regional stability. Despite numerous diplomatic efforts and international agreements aimed at resolving disputes, China's actions continue to challenge the sovereignty of neighboring nations and disrupt the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The problem lies in the lack of comprehensive understanding of how China's military buildup impacts global maritime security, the reactions of other regional powers, and the long-term consequences for international peace and stability. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the strategic, political, and security dimensions of China's military activities in the South China Sea.

Theoretical Framework

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) offers a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the military expansion of China in the South China Sea as well as its wider implications for global maritime security and future wars. The theory expounds on the interdependence of international order and stability with the presence of a dominant power that can provide rules, security and

economic stability within the international system. When the military, economic, and political power of a hegemonic group is overwhelming, they can create and maintain international norms that help guide interstate behavior and make it less likely to have major wars, HST says. But instabilities occur when a new power starts to threaten the authority and dominance of the current hegemon. Under this condition, there is a higher probability of strategic competition, military competition and geopolitical tensions. Thus, the South China Sea dispute can be discussed under the lens of hegemonic competition between the existing maritime power, U.S. and the emerging regional power, China (Noor & Marston, 2023).

Hegemonic Stability Theory, as the intellectual bedrock, was formulated by such giants as Charles P. Kindleberger, Robert Gilpin and Stephen D. Krasner. He believed that the world needed a strong nation willing and able to uphold economic and political stability in the world. He especially pointed out the importance of hegemonic leadership in the prevention of instability and in managing international crises. Robert Gilpin, in turn, advanced the theory, arguing that global political stability is dependent on the distribution of power in the global system. Peace tends to be a time of hegemony, and when the states of power change from hegemony to ascendance, there is typically conflict and instability. Stephen Krasner played an important role as well, stressing the critical importance of hegemonic powers in creating international regimes and institutions that govern political and economic relations internationally. Together, these scholars set out to lay the foundation for the central thesis: that hegemonic powers construct and sustain international order, but that their challenges to established powers upset the equilibrium and enhance geopolitical rivalry.

The tenets of Hegemonic Stability Theory have great relevance for the South China Sea situation today. First, the theory assumes of the need for a powerful hegemonic power to be able to impose rules, protect trade routes and establish strategic order in the international system. The United States has been the region's predominant maritime and military force since the end of the Second World War. The United States has maintained its naval dominance, military alliances, and economic influence, which have helped keep the waters free of foreign presence, trade, and security. The American-led international order has been especially vital in ensuring stability in one of the world's most strategically vital waterways: The South China Sea is a place where trillions of dollars in global trade flow each year. Throughout history, the U.S. Navy has maintained safety and access to these sea lanes, and supported the principle of freedom of the seas, which is a cornerstone of international law.

Secondly, Hegemonic Stability Theory implies that when the power of a new power rises, it will eventually threaten to dislodge the incumbent hegemonic power as it strives for greater influence and strategic control. In this context, China's military buildup in the South China Sea is an example of the rise of a new power aiming to change the regional power dynamics. China has over the last 20 years greatly modernized its military, particularly its navy, its coast guard and its maritime militia. It has made significant investments in its naval technologies, aircraft carriers, missiles, submarines, and surveillance capabilities to bolster its maritime capabilities. Moreover, China has been aggressively reclaiming land and building military installations and airstrips, radar and missile defence systems in the contested South China Sea regions, artificial islands. The developments reflect China's ambition to further assert its strategic position and gain greater control of key maritime areas (Institute, 2023).

In terms of Hegemonic Stability Theory, China's actions may be seen as a bid to upset the existing U.S.-led maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region. China sees the presence of the U.S. military and its alliances in the Asia region as a hindrance to its own regional goals. Thus, Beijing has already implemented policies to curb U.S. influence and enhance its military and geopolitical

power. The Nine-Dash Line claim by China, despite the international legal opposition, is an indication of China's overall strategy to claim the key maritime territories and resources of the South China Sea. By militarizing and strategically expanding its territory, China is trying to protect its economic and energy interests, but also to become the one that dominates in the region and that has influence over regional security arrangements and maritime governance.

Another key assumption of Hegemonic Stability Theory is that the times of power transition are often times fraught with instability and risks of competition and conflict. The South China Sea is one such example of the relationship between China and the United States. The Chinese seem to have become a competitor to the United States' strategic leadership and liberal international order since 1945. The Chinese are seen as a competitor to the United States' post 1945s defense of liberal international order and strategic leadership. To counter these actions, the United States has stepped up its military ties and has launched more naval activities in the waters of the region by deploying Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), and beefed up defence cooperation with regional partners like Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. The countermeasures are part of a larger strategy to limit Chinese influence and ensure stability in the region (Yong & Boon, 2024).

The South China Sea is thus a crucial theatre for the struggle of hegemony and transition of power. The contest has marked a rise in the militarization of the Indo-Pacific region and raised the risk of security dilemmas prevailing in the region. Other countries like Vietnam and the Philippines have also beefed up their militaries over the growing influence of China. The threat of unintended naval clashes, maritime incidents and the prospect of larger wars grows in multiple states as they all continue to improve their military capabilities. The Hegemonic Stability Theory suggests that this instability is likely to happen when the incumbent hegemon and the emerging challenger are competing for power in the international system.

The theory also has its application in the study of the effects of China's military expansion on international maritime security. One of the world's great sea lanes, the South China Sea links East Asia to Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Disruptions in this area would have a major impact on international trade, energy transport and economic stability. China's growing militarization and growing control of contested waters has unsettled the question of freedom of navigation and future of international law. The United States and its allies are concerned that China could eventually be able to control access to strategic sea lanes or establish regional dominance over sea lanes. These would change the current shipping system and could undermine the concept of free shipping as enshrined in international law (Defense, 2025).

To summarize, Hegemonic Stability Theory offers a very detailed explanation of the strategic interests behind China's military buildup in the South China Sea and the subsequent geopolitical competition with the U.S. The theory clarifies China's aim as it ascends as a power to contest the current U.S.-led maritime order and gain more influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Concurrently, it shows how transition of power from a hegemonic to an emerging power causes instability, militarization and risks of conflict. The South China Sea has, as a result, become a focal point of international strategic rivalry and a place where the maritime security of the region, its dominance and the international order are all entangled. The military activity of China may thus be viewed not just as a regional territorial dispute, but also as part of the global reconfiguration of power that could influence the future of international maritime security and geopolitical stability in the coming years (Hung & Tuan , 2022).

Research Methodology

The research methodology for examining China's military expansion in the South China Sea and its implications for global maritime security adopts a qualitative approach. It involves a detailed

analysis of existing literature, policy documents, government statements, international treaties, and reports from security organizations and think tanks. Key sources include academic journals, governmental and non-governmental publications, and expert opinions, focusing on historical, political, and strategic perspectives.

Expansion of Chinese Military Presence in the South China Sea

- **Construction of Artificial Islands and Militarization of the Islands**

One of the most notable changes in the South China Sea concerning the Chinese military is that it has become one of the most notable geopolitical changes in contemporary international relations. The South China Sea is a region of great natural and international significance, and of strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific region because of its large natural resources, very important sea lanes and its geopolitical role. In the last 20 years, China has radically changed its regional footprint with a massive military modernization program, consolidation of territory and strategic infrastructure building. China's controversial actions in the Spratlys and Paracel Islands, including its massive artificial island-building and militarization efforts in disputed waters, have been a sore point. A sore point has been China's massive artificial island-building and militarisation of its claim to disputed waters, especially those in the Spratlys and Paracel Islands. China has turned reefs and subsided land into artificial islands which are able to support military operations in the process of massive land reclamation. These projects picked up much speed after 2013 and featured dredging sand and other materials to expand reefs into permanent structures with complex military facilities (Thayer, 2020).

China has built military bases and strategic installations on some of its man-made islands, such as Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef. Such installations involve deep water ports, barracks, command centres, communication system and surveillance facilities which are able to sustain military deployment over the long haul. Military aircraft, such as bombers and fighter jets, can be landed on the long airstrips, thereby improving China's operational capabilities in the South China Sea. Moreover, China has deployed sophisticated missile systems, anti-aircraft guns, and radar sites on these islands, enhancing its anti-access and anti-area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The military facilities facilitate China's monitoring of maritime activities, tracking of foreign naval movements, and power projection through key sea lanes. The militarisation of the artificial islands has caused concerns among neighbouring states and the international community, as it has changed the strategic landscape and could lead to the risk of a military conflict in disputed waters (Blanchard, 2019).

China is claiming the islands as its own and that they are needed for defensive purposes to justify these actions. But critics say the militarisation of artificial islands is a breach of international law and it threatens regional stability. Many of China's claims were denied by the Permanent Court of Arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in its ruling in 2016. Yet, China has persistently been developing military infrastructure and boosting its physical presence in disputed regions in spite of this decision. The island-building campaign is proof of China's resolve to take firm control of strategic sea areas and enhance its power to thwart any and all foreign military interference.

- **Naval Modernization**

Besides the island militarisation, China has also been engaged in a comprehensive naval modernisation effort that seeks to develop the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) into a first-class naval force. China has embarked on massive naval construction programmes, technological advancements, and defense spending in the past 20 years, much of which has transformed its military. In the past 20 years, China has greatly built up its naval force by investing in defense spending, technology, and large-scale shipbuilding. The PLA Navy has emerged as one of the

world's largest naval powerhouses, demonstrating China's quest for maritime supremacy and safeguarding its far-reaching interests. The naval modernization is part of China's overall South China Sea and Indo-Pacific strategy.

China has vastly expanded the numbers of destroyers, frigates, corvettes and amphibious assault ships in its navy. These ships have advanced missile systems, electronic warfare systems, and complex communications, which they can use to engage in defensive and offensive maneuvers. China's naval modernization has been fueled by the development of its aircraft carrier capabilities, which has been one of the most notable areas of advancement. The aircraft carrier represents the power of the sea and is used to carry aircraft to great distances, beyond the boundaries of any country. Currently China has multiple aircraft carriers and is developing more advanced carrier strike groups to improve its maritime projection forces. The carriers enhance China's capability to patrol oceanic hotspots and deploy quickly in the event of a regional crisis. Modernization of its naval forces is also a key aspect of China's naval strategy. China has also spent a lot on its nuclear-powered and diesel-electric submarines that are fitted with state-of-the-art missile systems and stealth technology. These are part of China's effort to boost its deterrent power and making it more difficult for its adversaries to operate within the South China Sea. As China's undersea warfare capabilities grow, it is capable of challenging America's naval dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.

In addition to the navy, China has also beefed up the coast guard and maritime militia. The Chinese Coast Guard has evolved into one of the largest maritime law enforcement units in the world, and has been a key factor in China's efforts to assert its territorial claims. The coast guard is often used to patrol over the disputed waters, to escort fishing vessels or to prevent the entry of foreign ships into the contested waters. At the same time, China's maritime militia, which is largely made up of civilian fishing vessels that are directed by the Chinese government, is a valuable tool of strategic coercion. These militia units serve as an eyes and ears for the Chinese military, harass foreign ships and provide military assistance, and have plausible deniability for the Chinese government. The combination of navy, coast guards and maritime militia operations is indicative of the Chinese government's all-round strategy to strengthen its control of the South China Sea.

- **Strategic and Security Objectives**

The Chinese military's push into the South China Sea is a symptom of a number of overlapping strategic and security goals. One of the key objectives is securing maritime supremacy in the Indo Pacific region. Dominating the South China Sea would give China strategic depth and the power to affect one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. The region is vital to global maritime trade as about one-third of the world's shipping traffic transits through here. China's intensified military build-up aims to expand its influence in the region's maritime affairs and boost its power as a global force.

The other key goal of China's expansion is for energy security. The South China Sea is rich in oil and natural gas, which is vital to the development of China's economy and industry. China is the biggest importer of energy, and it is looking to minimize the risk of its energy transportation and its ability to access critical resources. Dominating the sea lanes and sea areas would make it easier for China to defend energy supplies and find future resource opportunities (Bharti, 2024).. Sea lanes are also vital to China's national security policy and must be guarded as well. International trade and sea transportation are crucial to China's economy, especially through the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca. If these trade routes are disrupted, it could have a negative effect on the economic stability and strategic interests of China. Hence, China has

focused on naval development and maritime security to ensure trade routes and trade movements are safe.

Other goals are the drive towards regional domination. China wants to assert its dominance over Asia and minimise the outside interference, especially the U.S. Since the mid-1990s, Chinese leaders have seen the military cooperation and naval visitation of the US with countries in the Indo-Pacific, which they believe aim to checkmate China's rise. This has led to some elements of China's military expansion aimed at curbing U.S. influence and reducing America's strategic dominance in the region. China is seeking to shift the balance of power in the region in its favor by building up its military strength and presence.

- **China's Gray-Zone Strategy**

One key part of China's game in the South China Sea is its adoption of gray-zone operations. Gray-zone strategies are actions conducted at a level that are not considered "wars," but are intended to achieve strategic goals through coercion, intimidation, and incremental territorial gain. China has successfully used Gray zone operations to consolidate itself without a direct military threat.

Maritime militia operations are one of the key aspects of the grey zone strategy adopted by China. State-coordinated civilian fishing boats are often sent to hotspot areas to claim Chinese territory and to patrol against foreign fishing boats. These sea-going militias frequently swarmed to block foreign vessels and cause pressure, but not to launch official wars. The fact that these vessels are seemingly civilian in nature poses challenges for responding states regarding what military responses should be made.

China also uses psychological coercive methods to deter and frighten neighbouring nations and resistance to Chinese claims. This involves several naval manoeuvres, meetings with foreign vessels and planes as well as warnings issued towards other claimants. These are meant to instil fear, uncertainty and pressure in China, and to help normalize its growing footprint in disputed regions gradually.

The hybrid maritime warfare also bolsters China's gray-zone approach. Hybrid tactics involve the use of military, economic, legal, informational and cyber tools to accomplish strategic objectives. China often supports its claims in the South China Sea with legal claims, propaganda campaigns, cyber operations and economic pressure as well. The multi-dimensional strategy allows China to have expansionist ambitions without the associated risks of direct armed conflict (Chase, 2024). In general, China's military build-up in the South China Sea highlights a multifaceted approach towards a mix of naval modernization, military presence, gray-zone operations, and strategic competition. The changes have fundamentally changed the security landscape in the Indo-Pacific region and will remain to influence future security and the international balance of power.

Implications for Global Maritime Security

- **Threats to Freedom of Navigation**

China's militarization of the South China Sea has had significant implications for international maritime security, including freedom of navigation. One of the most strategically significant waterways in the world, the South China Sea links the Pacific and Indian Oceans and serves as the route for much of the world's maritime trade. These waters receive trillions of dollars' worth of goods, such as energy supplies, manufactured goods and raw materials each year. Therefore, sea stability changes in this area have wide implications for the world. Growing military posts, the artificial islands, the deployment of missile systems and the expansion of naval patrols in the region have made China a concern for regional and global powers about the freedom of international sea routes. A number of states worry about the possibility of China's eventual dominance of maritime traffic, strategic chokepoints in the South China Sea.

International maritime law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) guarantee freedom of navigation, which means that all countries are free to fly commercial and military aircraft over international waters without restriction. But, China's all encompassing territorial claims using the Nine-Dash Line and its rising military prowess questions this principle. Chinese fishing boats, commercial shipping, and the military have often encountered foreign fishing boats, commercial ships, and military ships in the disputed waters, as well as Chinese coast guard ships and the maritime militia. These clashes escalate tensions and raise doubts for foreign shipping firms and regional nations that rely on sea lanes for trade. Furthermore, Chinese militarisation of strategic islands allows it to keep track of and potentially limit maritime operations via surveillance and radar installations and naval patrols. Such changes have raised concerns that the South China Sea will be further militarized and open less to foreign powers, thus reducing the openness of international sea lanes (Sing, 2024).

The dangers to international shipping are even greater since the South China Sea is a major route for international trade. A conflict, naval blockade or limitation of the freedom of passage in the vicinity of the region would affect the traffic of goods and have a negative effect on the international economy. Geopolitical unrest could result in increased insurance premiums, delays, rerouting costs, and security concerns for shipping companies. When crises arise, the main powers can compete with each other, for instance China and the United States, and their competition may pose a threat to the safety and security of the commercial use of the seas. Thus, the militarisation of the South China Sea is not just a regional security issue, but also a huge problem in the international maritime order.

- **Regional Militarization**

The rise of China's military power also has a significant impact on the militarization of the Indo-Pacific region. China is modernizing its fleet and expanding its naval reach into the disputed areas, which have elicited a reaction from neighboring countries to bolster their military readiness. China has been modernizing its navy and beefing up its military presence in the disputed areas, bringing a response from neighbours to strengthen their military preparedness. The arms race in the Indo-Pacific has been exacerbated by this, as the countries in the region are trying to counter China's rise by modernizing their militaries and forming alliances. Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and Australia have, for example, stepped up their defence spending, their navies, and military cooperation with external powers, in response to a perceived assertiveness of the Chinese.

Regional security relations have turned into a new paradigm of development of military alliances and strategic partnerships. The United States has reinforced security relations with regional partners, including the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), and bilateral military cooperation, including exercises. Washington has also bolstered security ties with nations such as Japan, Australia, South Korea and the Philippines to ensure a balance of power in the region. Likewise, the new strategic concept of Quadrilateral grouping of the United States, Japan, India and Australia is a part of wider attempts to check China's ambitious maritime expansion (Tan, 2024).

The regional militarisation raises the possibility of miscalculations, accidental clashes and military escalation. Naval patrols, military exercises, and tense encounters between rival forces can lead to a dangerous security situation, with the possibility of escalation into larger conflicts. The multiple military actors in the region and in contested waters add to the challenge of crisis management and conflict prevention. With an expanding China driving up arms sales and strengthening military forces across the region, the Indo-Pacific is becoming more polarized and unstable.

China's operations in the South China Sea are also having far-reaching consequences in the international realm of trade and economic stability. The South China Sea is one of the key trade routes in the world, through which about one-third of the world's sea trading takes place. These seaways are vital for transporting goods, energy supplies and industrial materials for major Asian, European and Middle Eastern economies. Thus, it is not only regional economies that are in danger of instability within the region, but the entire global economic system.

The impact on global trade is one of the major issues. The economies of today are very integrated with complicated global production and distribution chains. The South China Sea is highly strategic and its conflict or prolonged instability would hamper supply lines, supply deliveries and raise transportation expenses of business activities all over the world. Those industries that rely on imports of raw materials and manufactured goods would suffer great losses, with the possibility of inflation, shortages and economic slowing down. What COVID-19 has shown is how fragile global supply chains are when disruptions occur, and the South China Sea is a place of geopolitical tension (Wibowo, 2025).

The vulnerabilities of energy transportation are another key concern. The South China Sea is home to a significant share of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) trades, including energy supplies to East Asian economies like China, Japan and South Korea. A war or blockade in the region could disrupt energy supplies and have significant economic repercussions for oil and gas exporting countries. Partly, China's military presence in the region is due to China's desire for energy transportation routes. The ongoing militarization of sea lanes, however, creates worries about the future security of global energy transportation.

- **International Maritime Law**

The military expansion and territorial claims of China are also serious issues for international maritime law and the power of UNCLOS. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is the main legal instrument for international waters, including the establishment of maritime boundaries, rights of navigation, and the management of marine resources. But the Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision has been dismissed by China, which has also reiterated its claim to the Nine-Dash Line, diminishing the trust in implementation of international maritime law.

The dispute raises the wider issue of the effectiveness of international legal institutions faced with major powers who fail to follow court decisions that impinge on their national interests. China persists in its territorial claims despite challenges from the international community, because of their historical claims. This has led to more ambiguity and uncertainty in maritime sovereignty issues in the area. Smaller claimant states, like the Philippines and Vietnam, have considerable difficulty defending the rights to their maritime areas against a much stronger military power.

Its weakening of UNCLOS' authority has global ramifications in that it weakens the rules-based international order which applies to maritime conduct. As strong states continue to disregard international judgments, the world's maritime governance could become even less predictable, and rely more heavily on military power than on legal norms. This could raise the possibility of other territorial conflicts in the world and of a lesser international commitment in maritime matters.

- **Strategic implications for Indo Pacific security**

China's military expansion has brought about a major change in the strategic landscape of the Indo Pacific. The regional power balance will change as one of the important implications. The United States, in the past, enjoyed unrivalled naval strength in the Pacific and was the major enforcer of regional sea security. China, however, has been conducting a rapid military modernization and expanding naval force which has been seriously threatening the American

strategic supremacy. The South China Sea has thus emerged as a key battleground in geopolitical rivalry between the two powers (Odgaard, 2025).

The growth of strategic competition is no longer limited to military aspects; it also covers economic, political, technological and ideological aspects. China wants to become the top dog in Asia and minimize U.S. influence. By contrast, the United States wants to uphold the status quo on the international order and to guarantee strategic access to the Indo Pacific. The competition has deepened geopolitical tensions and has created more uncertainties about possible future regional security architecture.

The smaller regional powers also feel the impact of this strategic rivalry. Economic ties with China and security guarantees from America are a delicate balance in many Southeast Asian nations. This presents regional governments with diplomatic and strategic dilemmas when they are trying to prevent themselves from being drawn into larger power games. This polarization can thus influence regional security, security partnerships, economic cooperation and alliances for the coming decades in the Indo-Pacific region.

Finally, China's South China Sea military build-up has significant impacts on global maritime security, international trade, regional stability and the evolving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The process of militarisation in the South China Sea, violations of international sea laws and the escalating strategic competition between China and the USA have made the South China Sea one of the most sensitive geopolitical flashpoints in today's international politics (Rudd, 2022).

Responses of Global Powers and Regional Actors

- **Response of the United States**

The military expansion and growing assertiveness of China in the South China Sea have sparked strong reactions from key international and regional actors who have worried about the rules-based international order, maritime security, and regional stability. The U.S. has been the biggest obstacle to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific among these actors. Since the conclusion of the Second World War, the United States is the leading naval force in the world, and advocates freedom of navigation, open access to the sea and a balance of power in the region as part of its strategic interests. To this end, the administration in Washington has taken military, diplomatic and strategic measures to challenge Beijing's claims and to block the Chinese from having an unchallenged control of the South China Sea.

Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) are a key tool in American policy. The activities of the Navy are aimed at asserting excessive claims over the sea and reaffirming the principle in international law that the sea is open to all states and specifically the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). U.S. naval ships and aircraft routinely patrol around the disputed islands and disputed maritime areas that are also contested by China via FONOPs. These are the operations that are designed to show that the United States is not recognizing China's territorial claims that cover the Nine-Dash Line. The U.S. Navy has also been carrying out military exercises in the waters surrounding the Chinese-controlled artificial islands, which is meant to uphold the freedom of navigation in international waters as well as to prevent China from blocking off strategic sea passages.

These operations are met with strong criticism from China, which claims that they are in breach of Chinese sovereignty and pose a threat to regional peace. But the United States insists that FONOPs are vital to "the rule of law at sea" and that no one should control one of the world's largest shipping lanes. The operations also help to reassure regional allies and smaller nations that the United States is still dedicated to regional security and is countering China's military expansion in their region.

The United States has also embraced a more expansive Indo-Pacific Strategy that seeks to maintain a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” This strategy would indicate a change in Washington's understanding of China as a long-term potential challenger in a new regional geopolitical landscape marked by rising Chinese military and economic power. The Indo-Pacific Strategy focuses on building up military presence, broadening diplomatic outreach, securing maritime security, and deepening relations with allies and partners in the region. The United States has stepped up its naval presence, clashed with China over military exercises and boosted intelligence exchanges across the region to enhance its deterrent capabilities against any possible Chinese aggression.

An additional key aspect of the American response is through military alliances and strategic partnerships. The United States has strengthened security partnership with Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines, and has expanded partnership with emerging partners such as India and Vietnam. The Quadrilateral, which includes the United States, Japan, India and Australia, is a joint approach to regional cooperation against Chinese expansion. Likewise, the increasing focus on defense cooperation and technological cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was reflected in the AUKUS security alliance between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These alliances and partnerships are designed to preserve a delicate balance of power and to prevent a unipolar approach to changing the regional status quo in the U.S. interest (Gill, 2022).

- **ASEAN**

The Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also has been a key player in the South China Sea, but in a much different way than the U.S. ASEAN is composed of ten Southeast Asian states that have different political systems, economic interests and relationships with China. Several member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) directly involved in territorial disputes with China are Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. But, overall, ASEAN focuses on diplomacy, diplomacy, and diplomacy on avoiding conflict.

ASEAN continues to use diplomatic means as its main approach to solve the issue regarding the South China Sea conflict. ASEAN has always stressed the peaceful settlement of disputes, regional stability and respect for international law. On a regular basis, ASEAN through regional summits, meetings of ministers and diplomatic forums seeks to enable dialogue between claimant states and help defuse tensions. ASEAN leaders often urge caution and confidence-building steps as well as refraining from actions that may worsen the situation of tension and instability in disputed areas.

The negotiation of ASEAN-China Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea is one of the most important ASEAN endeavours. The suggested Code of Conduct is designed to set the rules and guidelines of state conduct in the disputed maritime zones. It aims at defusing tension, averting military escalation, encouraging peaceful dispute settlement and facilitating regional cooperation. The discussions on the Code of Conduct have been ongoing for years, as the interests of various claimant states and China's strategic goals have been at play.

Although these diplomatic moves have taken place, ASEAN has encountered great difficulties in co-ordinating a reaction to China's military buildup. There are also some ASEAN countries that are not ready to take a stand against China and have strong economic and political ties with it. Having this internal division undermines ASEAN's capacity to collectively take firm positions on Chinese activities in the South China Sea. In addition, ASEAN is also lacking in terms of military power to stand up to China's expanding maritime influence on its own. Thus, although the ASEAN is a key political player, its role in the dispute is still less than that of the major powers like the United States and China.

However, ASEAN remains as an important forum for dialogue and dispute resolution in the region. The focus on multilateral diplomacy and peacefully engagement with neighbours underscores the broader regional apprehensions on the impact of great power competition in Southeast Asia. The importance of diplomatic institutions in preventing escalation and preserving regional stability in the face of growing geopolitical competition is demonstrated through ASEAN's role.

The countries in the region that are most affected by China's military expansion have responded with different types of security policies to safeguard their national sovereignty and maritime interests. Vietnam is one of the most vocal critics of China's claims in the South China Sea among these states. Vietnam has long had conflicts with China on contested maritime areas, including the Spratlys and Paracels. Vietnam has taken measures to bolster its national defence, fortify its maritime security system and counter China's military presence in the region following the recent increase in the number of warships in the South China Sea (Heydarian, 2022).

The defense policy of Vietnam emphasizes the process of military modernization, deterrence and strategic diversification. Vietnam has been aggressively investing in naval expansion, acquisition of submarines, coastal surveillance and missile defence systems. Vietnam has also built up defense ties with outsiders including the United States, Japan, India and Russia to bolster its strategic standing. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the country is trying to keep a balance between its diplomatic relations with both China and other countries, considering the country is an economically integrated part of the "greater China" region and is geographically close to China. This two-pronged strategy is part of Vietnam's overarching goal of deterring China's assertiveness without engaging in direct military conflict.

The Philippines has also taken unprecedented actions in reaction to China's activities. The Philippines, one of the main claimants in the South China Sea dispute, has often clashed with Chinese coast guard ships and maritime militia in the South China Sea. After the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 1916 ruled in favor of the Philippines and against China's claims to the Philippines' territory, Manila stepped up its diplomatic campaigns to protect the country's territory under the international law.

The Philippines-U.S. partnership is gaining significance due to security issues in the region. They have a long military alliance known as the Mutual Defense Treaty, and the last few years have seen a growing military partnership, joint training exercises and greater military access to bases in the Philippines by the Americans. For the Philippines, the U.S. security presence is critical in protecting against any forms of coercion, and in enhancing the country's defence. The Philippine governments have not always been able to maintain a strict stance towards China, however, due to the military and economic considerations they have at times gone the other way to gain economic assistance and investment from China.

The security relationship between Japan and Australia, too, has been strengthening in the Indo-Pacific context, as both countries have started to worry about China's rising power. Japan relies heavily on the South China Sea for the passage of trade and energy imports and hence considers freedom of navigation and maritime stability as very important to its interests. As a result, Japan has been broadening its defense cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, enhancing military capacity and is said to be stepping up its involvement in security initiatives with the United States in the region.

Similarly, Australia has scaled up its strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific with military upgrades, regional alliances and cooperation in naval exercises. Canberra is becoming more aware of China's military build-up as a threat to regional security and the existing rules-based

international order. Australia's involvement with AUKUS and its increased military ties with regional partners and the United States highlight concerns about China's military expansion. To sum up, China's military expansion in the South China Sea has sparked a complicated response from key powers and South China Sea actors. The United States has been seeking military deterrence and alliance building to stand against China's rise, while ASEAN has focused on diplomacy and multilateral negotiations. The states in the region, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and Australia, have been building up their defense forces and forge alliances to safeguard their maritime interests and balance the region. These responses underscore the increasing geopolitical importance of the South China Sea and the extent to which China's operations have made the region a key battleground in the world's strategic landscape.

Possible Outcomes of China's Military Expansion in the South China Sea

China's military expansion in the South China Sea may produce several possible political, economic, and security outcomes for the Indo-Pacific region and the wider international system. These outcomes range from peaceful diplomatic management to intensified military confrontation between major powers. The future trajectory of the South China Sea dispute will largely depend on the behavior of regional actors, the strategic competition between China and the United States, and the effectiveness of international institutions and diplomatic mechanism (Southgate, 2025)..

1. Intensification of U.S.–China Strategic Rivalry

One of the most likely outcomes is the further intensification of strategic competition between China and the United States. As China continues expanding its military capabilities and consolidating control over disputed maritime areas, the United States is expected to strengthen its military presence and alliances within the Indo-Pacific region. This rivalry may lead to:

- Increased naval deployments
- Frequent military exercises
- Expanded surveillance operations
- Greater geopolitical polarization in Asia

The South China Sea may increasingly become the central arena of great-power competition, similar to Cold War geopolitical rivalries.

2. Increased Regional Militarization

Another major outcome could be the acceleration of militarization across the Indo-Pacific region. Neighboring states such as Vietnam, Philippines, Japan, and Australia are likely to continue strengthening military capabilities in response to China's growing influence.

This could result in:

- Rising defense expenditures
- Naval modernization programs
- Expansion of military alliances
- Development of missile defense systems

Such trends may create a regional arms race and increase long-term instability.

3. Higher Risk of Military Conflict

The growing military presence of multiple powers within contested waters increases the possibility of accidental or intentional conflict. Naval vessels, coast guard ships, and military aircraft frequently operate in close proximity, creating risks of:

- Maritime collisions
- Miscalculations
- Escalation of small incidents into larger confrontations

A conflict could emerge through:

- Disputed territorial claims
- Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)
- Taiwan-related tensions
- Maritime militia confrontations

Although a full-scale war remains unlikely due to economic interdependence and nuclear deterrence, limited military clashes remain a serious possibility (Tahir, 2024).

4. Weakening International Maritime Law

China's rejection of certain international legal rulings, especially the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision, may weaken the authority of international maritime law and institutions such as UNCLOS.

Possible consequences include:

- Reduced confidence in international legal mechanisms
- Increased unilateral territorial claims by states
- Greater reliance on military power rather than legal norms
- Erosion of the rules-based international order

This could create long-term challenges for global maritime governance.

5. Disruption of Global Trade and Economic Stability

The South China Sea is one of the world's busiest trade corridors, carrying a major portion of global maritime commerce and energy transportation. Any prolonged instability or conflict in the region could severely affect:

- Global supply chains
- International shipping
- Oil and gas transportation
- Manufacturing industries
- Global financial markets

Shipping costs and insurance rates could rise significantly if maritime security deteriorates. Major economies dependent upon Indo-Pacific trade routes would experience economic disruptions.

6. Expansion of Gray-Zone Warfare

China may continue relying on gray-zone tactics that avoid direct conventional warfare while gradually expanding strategic influence. This may include:

- Maritime militia operations
- Cyber warfare
- Information warfare
- Economic coercion
- Psychological pressure on neighboring states

Gray-zone competition could become the dominant form of conflict in the South China Sea because it allows states to pursue strategic goals without triggering open war.

7. Strengthening of U.S.-Led Alliances

China's expansion may encourage stronger security cooperation among Indo-Pacific states. The United States is likely to deepen strategic partnerships with:

- Japan
- Australia
- India
- Philippines

Initiatives such as:

- The Quad

- AUKUS
- Joint naval exercises (Phan, 2025).
- Intelligence-sharing agreements

may expand further in response to Chinese assertiveness.

8. Emergence of a Bipolar Indo-Pacific Order

The South China Sea dispute may contribute to the emergence of a bipolar regional order dominated by China and the United States. Smaller regional states could face pressure to align with one side or balance relations between both powers.

This may produce:

- Strategic divisions within Southeast Asia
- Competing economic and security blocs
- Increased geopolitical polarization
- Reduced regional neutrality

The Indo-Pacific could increasingly resemble a competitive sphere of influence divided between major powers.

9. Possibility of Diplomatic Conflict Management

Despite rising tensions, another possible outcome is the strengthening of diplomatic mechanisms and crisis-management frameworks. Regional organizations such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations may continue efforts to negotiate:

- Confidence-building measures
- Maritime communication mechanisms
- Rules for naval encounters
- ASEAN-China Code of Conduct

Successful diplomacy could reduce risks of accidental conflict and encourage peaceful dispute management.

10. China's Emergence as a Dominant Maritime Power

If current trends continue, China may gradually establish itself as the dominant maritime power within the South China Sea and broader Indo-Pacific region. Through military modernization, artificial island militarization, and economic influence, China could strengthen its ability to:

- Control strategic sea lanes
- Influence regional politics
- Expand maritime security influence
- Challenge U.S. naval dominance

Such an outcome would significantly reshape the regional balance of power and global geopolitical dynamics (Lee, 2024).

Conclusion

To sum up, the military expansion of China in the South China Sea (SCS) has become one of the biggest geopolitical and maritime security threats of the twenty first century. China has been significantly expanding its strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific through a number of gray zone strategies, naval modernization and the construction of artificial islands, as well as the presence of disputed areas under its control. The developments have brought strategic competition with the United States to a new level, led to a growing militarization in the region, and sparked worries about freedom of navigation, maritime law, and security of global commerce. The South China Sea has thus become a strategic space of struggle for dominance between regional powers, international law and global economic interests. The study suggests that with Hegemonic Stability Theory, the rise and challenge of the current U.S.-led Indo-Pacific maritime order by China have led to increased instability and potential conflict in the region. Meanwhile, the

reactions from regional countries, ASEAN diplomacy and international strategic pacts represent the broader attempt to maintain balance and stability in the seas in the region. While there is always a possibility for diplomatic means of conflict management, ongoing militarisation and geopolitical rivalry may further escalate tensions in the future. In the end, it is necessary to strengthen the cooperation of various countries, respect the law of the sea, conduct good diplomatic work and strategic behavior of each major player in the South China Sea in order to promote peace and stability in the region.

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