



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>
 Vol. 05 No. 02. April-June 2026. Page# 2118-2132
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Multipolarity and the Future of Maritime Governance in the South China Sea

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Abstract

This study looks at the South China Sea, a very strategic and contentious maritime area, through the lens of the multipolar framework of future maritime administration. It goes over the ways in which the change from a unipolar to a multipolar international system has impacted the systems of regional cooperation, security relations, governance, and law. There are conflicts going on in the South China Sea between various countries, namely China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, and China again. Sea is also blocked by foreign powers such as United States, Japan, India and Australia. Violations of international law, particularly UNCLOS, intensifying militarism, and rising geopolitical rivalry are all aspects of this complicated scenario. Using qualitative research methods, secondary data is gathered from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, international law, and from a range of institutions. The study takes a Balance of Power Theory and perspective of Liberal Institutionalism approach to analyzing the state relations in a multipolar maritime situation. Results indicate that LGs face opportunities and challenges that have emerged under multipolarity. It has resulted in increased political engagement and diversification of security cooperation, although there has been a downside in terms of less institutional efficiency and increased strategic competition. The governance outcomes include ASEAN's fragmented governance and also low level of enforcement in ASEAN. The study finds the process of maritime governance in the South China Sea is a hybrid process of cooperation and competition. It requires stronger regional institutions, improved law enforcement and improved cooperation between multilateral institutions for longer term stability and sustainable governance of the seas.

Keywords

ASEAN Cooperation, Balance of Power, Geopolitical Competition, Multipolarity, Maritime Governance, South China Sea, UNCLOS,

Introduction

The South China Sea is quite tense politically and geopolitically these days. The South China Sea links the principal economies of the world and is an essential shipping corridor for transporting energy resources and military forces. It is also the lifeblood of Indo-Pacific area. The

shipping trade in this region has become the transshipment corridor for nearly a third of the world's shipping trade worth over \$3 trillion on an annual basis, and links the Pacific and Indian Ocean. Fish, oil and natural gas are valuable resources in relationship to the economy that are found in the ocean at a local, national and international level. The South China Sea is a region of central importance to the world in terms of its strategic and economic value yet it has become a controversy among several countries concerning who owns the waters and how they ought to be governed. Owning in the South China Sea encompasses many nations, such as Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. The larger of these is the "nine-dash line," claimed by China and overlapping with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) under claim of Southeast Asian countries pursuant to UNCLOS, which is causing the greatest controversy. Neighbors of China are asserting their right to land according to international maritime law; China has its historical rights, claiming ownership of almost 90 per cent of the South China Sea. The conflict between claims and laws in the region has worsened the situation, posing threats to regional stability and peace. The Permanent Court of Arbitration last year ruled that China's 9-dash line claims were groundless, but that did not put an end to the Philippine government's activities in the disputed waters. This raised concerns about the prevalence and performance of international legal mechanisms in the implementation of marine governance, due to the size of the power resistance (Ari Yunanto, 2025).

In recent years, it has also become obvious that regional powers and global powers are increasingly warring against one another in terms of the South China Sea and endangering it. China has been beefing up its military forces in contested waters through man-made islands, missile deployments and enhancing the presence of its coast guard. The timing of all this coincides with the U.S. beefing up its operations in South-east Asia with military exercises, strategic partnerships and its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). Other countries which have stepped up their footprints in the Indo-Pacific region include Japan, India, Australia and the European Union. They want to preserve the marine space in the area, along with create an international order based on rules. What's new is that a new globocentric system is not a single super power, but rather a large number of super powers, and many actors are involved in creating this new system. It is very remarkable, but the idea of the multipolarity of the South China Sea governance is emerging. Maritime governance is the systems, institutions, laws and cooperative mechanisms that exists in place to govern maritime activities, resolve maritime conflicts, and stabilise the sea. In the past, the governance from the region was mainly relying in international law, regional cooperation and diplomacy under ASEAN mechanism. But with the advent of many powers, this form of governance has been complicated. Different actors' divergent strategic and economic and security interests and approaches to actor behaviour are reflected in differences over approaches to conflict management and maritime regulation. Some of them are oriented towards the law; others towards the military force and geopolitical influence. Issues that have been of concern are the sustainability of the effectiveness of the regional governance mechanisms (Bilal 2025).

The Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been doing its best to bring peace back to the region and is pushing for a COC with China, which discussions it has been running since 2002. However, ASEAN is faced with a number of challenges due to the ideological differences and national interests of the member countries. The more economically coupled countries in ASEAN are less inclined to opposing in the affairs of the sea because it reduces the strength of collective bargaining within ASEAN. The more economically coupled ASEAN countries are less inclined towards opposing affairs of sea because of the weakening of the power of ASEAN collective bargaining. That has made them somewhat ineffective as they failed to form a unified

and definitive government for the region. The emergence of the strategic rivalry between the great powers has made ASEAN's ability to stay neutral and stable in-between more difficult. The South China Sea is grappling with environmental and economic governance issues however, that are in addition to geopolitical competition. While the enforcement of the law has been weak, it has been found that there are several overlapping fishing rights claims, resulting in escalation of IUU fishing. Over fishing, coral reef destruction and the wide-spreading dredging to construct the artificial islands seriously affect the marine ecosystem. The impacts of these environmental challenges are manifested as food insecurity and life of millions of people who have livelihoods dependent on the sea are at stake. Coastal communities and sea level rise sensitive infrastructure in the region is also further precipitated by the effects of climate change and sea level rise on them. Maritime governance, in addition to being a security issue, can be an environmental sustainability and human security issue as well in the South China Sea (Minh Tiến Phạm, 2024).

The aim of this research is to discuss the multipolarity and the future of the governance in maritime issues in the South China Sea. The study aims at a detailed analysis of the role played by power transfers in the governance system, the institutional order, the system of security cooperation and security conflict management. It seeks to measure the impact of multipolarity on enhanced multilateral governance or greater competition and polarization. The role of major powers, middle powers and middle powers organisations from a comprehensive point of view, which is needed to understand the changing maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region, will be examined. The significance of the study lies in the fact that it will help in academic and policy analysis and debate concerning international security and maritime rule of law. In the age of multipolarity, the implications of such a shift for governance arrangements are important to understand in the context of the South China Sea, where it is integral to global trade and regional stability, and in developing strategies for effective conflict management and long-term peace. The findings of this research can assist in enhancing the cooperation, maritime governance and maritime stability in an international maritime space, which is one of the most conflictual in the world (CFR, 2024). The multipolarity influences the governance of the maritime South China Sea in terms of power competition, cooperation, security, legality, and stability of the region. The paper employs the thematic analysis and secondary sources to explore the impact of multipolarity on the governance of the South China Sea.

Literature Review

In 2025, Edward Sing says that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its quest to shape the international maritime architecture have attracted considerable attention. The study makes a discourse analysis of 230 articles written by Chinese academics to examine the Chinese academic views on ocean governance. The findings indicate that rather than limited analyses of the ocean governance mechanisms in terms of seapower, Chinese scholars have adopted a multi-disciplinary and relatively comprehensive perspective in their analysis of existing ocean governance mechanisms. Their general idea of the existing maritime order has been mostly that of its inadequacy and disadvantage to China's maritime interests. This study aims to support the Chinese government in its quest for a key leadership role in ocean governance and put forward projects that are in keeping with the Party's ideological battle against liberalism of the West. The concept of 'maritime community with a shared future' is translated into the rhetoric; parts of the rhetoric are connected with the objective of 'marine community with a shared future'. It is useful for the study of China's attitude towards global governance and impact in maritime security (Edward Sing, 2025). In 2025 Zhang and Li remind the reader that over the ages, the South China Sea (SCS) has been a subject of debate, and that there are growing geopolitical concerns and the need for new frameworks for establishing peace in the South China Sea. This page discusses the

Community of Shared Future (CSF), which is China's approach for a peaceful SCS. The CSF is multilateralist, and practices conflict de-escalation, economic integration and joint resource management, with the idea of mutual gain being central to it. There are many factors behind conflict in different regions which have made matters worse over time such as colonialism, resource jealousy and international disputes. Faggardly adding to the situation is the militarization of the claimants in 2016. The CSF challenges the zero-sum logic by arguing for common objectives, such as the temporary suspension of the sovereignty dispute, joint planning and implementation of energy and fisheries projects, and cooperative principles in ASEAN discussions and dialogues. The development of infrastructure and protector of the ocean, expansion of tourism though Bela and road, and all of the above are important steps towards achieving this. In Indonesia the issues considered are two-fold: namely sovereignty and economics with a focus on pragmatics (Zhang and Li, 2025).

In 2025, Elikoğlu says this Study will not be a China/USA conflict or South China Sea conflict. In particular, the regional level will not be the focus of sub-security systems of the international system. The view will not be limited to a specific geographic area or time on the globe, there will be no area or time studied. The system will be assessed as a whole system. The concept of cyclicity of the historical process and of the whole System will be assessed with the help of differential time and space emphasis, with Geopolitical Dualism, the concept to be emphasized. This study is intended to provide you with an unusual or alternative perspective on the competition between powers that have the capacity to influence heights of the System, in both past and the present. In this perspective, the actors-based traditional geopolitical image is solved. Elikoğlu (2025) has tried to introduce, into the literature, a dimension of “blue tones” to the geopolitical perspective in the scenario of Continental Power vs Sea Power. In 2025, Chaudhry characterizes the contemporary world as a great paradigm shift where the unipolar post-Cold-War era has been giving way to a more multipolar world where there is competition. In this evolution, China is playing a critical role in establishing new rules and frameworks for global governance, including the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative, alongside the growth of its involvement in multilateral institutions and regional organizations. This paper emphasises that this vision is strategic, the mixed reactions it received from the regions, and big contradictions, which cast doubts about this vision's sustainability from a long-term perspective. Based on this, the paper further finds that China is a significant norm entrepreneur, a reformer and a strategic player in the new pluralistic world order and its actions will affect the IR landscape for the coming decades (Chaudhry, 2025).

The multilateralism is under pressure in 2024, driven by a series of interconnected crises around the world, from the war to the storms that include climate catastrophe, pandemics and economic crises, etc., and these are undercutting the multilateralism's efficiency and legitimacy, Thakur remarks. This nonfunctional multilateralism of the past 30 years is what has paved the way for the birth of minilateralism, the new and less deferential global South and the formation of new global powers like China and India that are a threat to the traditional multilateralism. The article concentrates on the rise of minilateralism and the ‘tenor of the Global South’ and its impact on the credibility and legitimacy of multilateral institutions, such as the UN, World Bank, EU and the IMF. Finally, it goes on to argue that there is a need for a reformed and effective UN and UN agencies, minilateralism that are more globally inclusive, active and committed; a more potent role for Civil Society Organizations (Thakur, 2024); and a more effective Non-Aligned Movement. Alfarizi and Bainus have mentioned in 2026 that many geopolitical and geostrategic issues of the South China Sea may be highlighted, from which sovereignty breach in North Natuna Sea is one that is more troubling for Indonesia. Taking into account these risks, Indonesia's

maritime diplomacy is believed to be fundamental as part of Indonesia's overall strategy, namely in the field of defense diplomacy, foreign policy diplomacy tools and the principle of international law. This study uses a combination of qualitative and descriptive method to explore the impact of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy on its response to maritime security issues in the South China Sea as well as analysis of the literature and documents. The results illustrate that Indonesia's maritime diplomacy is multidimensional in nature ranging from bilateral and multilateral, maritime, the coast guard, and international law approach through UNCLOS 1982. Amid various domestic and external challenges, Indonesia has managed to ensure the peace in the region, fortify its legal position in international issues and accommodate internal conflicts well with maritime diplomacy. The recommendations for this report are related to enhancing multilateral diplomacy, strengthening inter-agency cooperation, and enhancing national marine capability to prepare for new complex threats (Alfarizi and Bainus, 2026).

Questions:

- What effect does multipolarity have on the effectiveness of the maritime governance mechanisms in the South China Sea?
- How do regional and extra-regional powers influence the security, cooperation and conflict management of South China Sea region?

Theoretical Framework

The Balance of Power theory in international politics is a fundamental theory from which the South China Sea geopolitical rivalry is rooted. The idea is that every nation, state in the world, tries to prevent the emergence of a superpower in the system. States with the aim of preserving peace and advancing their own interests, fortify their armies, establish alliances and operate strategically. It is a multipolar world with many strong states operating at different levels of power and a precarious balance between the regional and the global actors. The South China Sea is a real-life illustration of this concept in practice. The Indo Pacific region is witnessing the rise of the Chinese influence in accordance with its economy and military power. China has intensified its activity in the East China Sea with drills creating islands, expanding its fleet and deploying its coast guard, to consolidate claims to contested maritime zones. Other countries have adopted balance policies to counteract that of China. The U.S. has bolstered relations with the military forces of Japan and the Philippines, boosted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and adopted a proactive approach in Indo Pacific area. India, Japan and Australia are also focused on enhancing regional naval exercises and cooperation for security reasons, while maintaining the rules based order at sea (Oktay Kucukdegirmenci, 2024).

Member-states of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) are acting responsibly in baling their diplomatic act by both asking for security cooperation from other countries and retaining economic ties with China. Look at the Philippines for instance; they have maintained ties with China, but have also gained ties with the US. Vietnam has also enhanced the cooperation in the field of defense in Marine areas with the US, Japan and India to push harder for safeguarding the maritime borders of the country. Efforts by regional states to establish strategic balance in a multipolar world are shown by these developments. This research is based on the Balance of Power Theory for a better understanding of the dynamics of power struggle about maritime governance in the SCS. This theory can be useful in understanding the impact of regional and global players on security arrangements, the diplomatic process, and conflict management. Moreover, it clarifies the one-dimensional cooperation and conflict among the states competing for strategic advantage in a multipolar region (Sun, 2014).

To maintain harmony and stability among nations, liberal institutionalism advocates for robust international institutions, rules, and collaboration. Unlike realist theories, liberal

institutionalists consider institutions to be more important for reducing conflict because they can help institutions shape discourse, and set rules and engage in collective action. Cooperative efforts enable governments to resolve issues peacefully and enhance transparency and trust between each other. The maritime region of the South China Sea is mostly under the organizations and laws of control. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the general law governing territorial seas, EEZs and maritime rights. But marking the first-ever victory for the Philippines in its dispute with China over the islands in the East China Sea and South China Sea, the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling proved the effectiveness of international law, though there are challenges to this enforcement. ASEAN's attempts to better demonstrate regional cooperation include diplomatic steps like the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and ongoing talks with China concerning the development of Code of Conduct (COC) (Seo 2024).

Liberal Institutionalism is relevant to the research as it helps in clarifying elements of collaboration and institutions in marine governance in a multipolar context. The theory has introduced awareness of how multilateral forums (such as ASEAN or UNCLOS) could potentially serve as a means of reducing conflict potential and identify more peaceful means to resolve conflicts between States. Furthermore, it looks at the performance of the current approaches on the South China Sea geopolitical tension issue that seems to be getting worse. Further, the theory supports the notion of a common interest, which could enable rival states to join in cooperation such as with water, or the sea for example. Despite the political tensions, cooperation on naval drills, marine dialogue and environmental exchange – both within and among regions – has been unfettered. Therefore, it is essential to consider the role of governance in promoting regional stability even in a challenging multipolar dynamics, something where Liberal Institutionalism can assist (Brian, 2025)

Conceptual Framework

The main theory used in this research is based on discussing the relation between maritime governance in the South China Sea with multipolarity. The framework includes aspects of maritime governance, security and cooperation in the context of evolving power dynamics in the maritime sphere. Maritime governance is dependent variable while multipolarity is independent variable in this study. A key assumption of the framework is that the rise of large Indo-Pacific states affects the effectiveness of the governance, legal arrangements, and stability of the South China Sea. The involvement of major and medium powers especially countries such as China, United States, India, Japan, Australia, and countries of ASEAN in the insecurity of the South China Sea indicates multipolar of this South China Sea. These players play a role in maritime governance in areas of diplomacy, commercial partnerships, legal initiatives, and naval tactics. China is trying to build up its military prowess and establish its sovereignty in the area, while the United States is struggling to defend "rules-based" order and freedom of navigation internationally. Other countries are trying to enhance the sea security by forming alliance and cooperation with China. These include countries such as Australia, Japan and India. ASEAN's middle ground approach is one of promoting communication, regional diplomacy and peaceful settlement of dispute. Marine governance is the dependent variable and has many sub-components including many aspects of law, institutions, cooperation on maritime security, environmental protection, and conflict management tactics. The South China Sea's institutions, such as UNCLOS, Southeast Asian discussion led by ASEAN and the planned COC, play a huge part in the governance of the South China Sea. These processes aim to free up sea routes, solve territorial disputes and to control marine activity, all of which should help to bring stability to the region. Conversely, where there are adequate regions' and global actors' strategic interests and

a good relationship, good governance may be attained. Further, many intermediate aspects are described in the model that offer a link between maritime governance and multipolarity. These reasons include environmental issues, economic vulnerabilities, nationalism and military modernization. For instance, in the Asia Pacific the rise of strategic rivalry with the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) could lead to greater militarism, lost trust among regional actors, and weaker governance institutions. However, if states have common concerns and interests in environmental sustainability, they may be interested in co-operation and in multi-lateral action. The conceptual framework assumes that multipolarity has its pros and cons for marine governance, which is the case.

Research Methodology

This study is delivered to explore the role of multipolar within the area of maritime governance in South China Sea through the prism of qualitative research. The study is qualitative because it seeks to do more than data – it seeks to explore the issues of institutional governance, maritime security, geopolitics, and global interactions. This study aims to analyse and describe the functioning of the major and middle powers of the Indo Pacific in the areas of maritime governance systems, regional cooperation and conflict management. This study adopts an interpretivist approach, as it is more appropriate to understand the political actions, diplomacy, strategic interests and legal understanding of the conflict participants in the South China Sea issue. The South China Sea is a very sensitive sea zone, this research emphasizes on a case study of South China Sea. This enables to study governance issues, maritime conflicts and the regional power dynamics in a multiply polar world. The various global powers – China, US, ASEAN members, and middle powers such as Japan, India and Australia – influence the outcomes of maritime governance in various ways that are explored in the article. Pervin and Mokhtar (2022) additionally argue that this study immerses readers in the dynamics of the COC, UNCLOS and ASEAN mannered diplomacy in a bid to mitigate the tension and promote maritime security in the region.

Marine security data is very confidential and hence in many cases difficult to obtain, primary data is therefore not used in this study. Secondary sources such as books, scholarly articles, official studies, policy papers, publications from think tanks and international legal documents may provide insights on the geopolitics of the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific. We also rely on reputable sources like the Stimson Centre, the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, CSIS and the UN and the ASEAN Secretariat for accurate and current information. Documents relevant to maritime governance, multipolarity and regional security are carefully chosen based on a purposeful sampling strategy that ensures validity and reliability. Some themes that arose from the data analysis which were conducted using a thematic analysis are strategic competitiveness, maritime security, environmental challenges, legal governance and regional cooperation. Comparative analysis is also applied to various region and global players' strategies and policies over the South China Sea. This research will examine developments since 2010 such as the Chinese policy on building islands, the arbitration ruling in 2016, the significance of the 'Indo Pacific' in the US foreign policy and the role of 'middle powers'. Data is double-checked and evaluated for validity and dependability from a variety of credible sources (Nickerson, 2024).

Overview of Key Findings

The analysis of secondary data shows that multipolarity has fundamentally transformed maritime governance in the South China Sea, by distributing power across various regional and global actors. The region is no longer dominated by any single power but rather a multitude of overlapping spheres of influence: those of China, the United States, the ASEAN member nations, and middle powers like Japan, India and Australia. The re-distribution of power has resulted in

positive and negative consequences. One important conclusion is that governance mechanisms are becoming “actor dependent” as their effectiveness depends on the political will of the dominant states. Formally, legal instruments like UNCLOS are still binding, but they are not all enforced for various reasons of power imbalance (Clegg, 2026).

Table 1: Major Actors and Their Maritime Governance Roles

Actor	Strategic Role	Governance Approach	Key Actions
China	Regional power claimant	Sovereignty-driven governance	Island building, coast guard expansion
United States	External balancing power	Rules-based order enforcement	Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)
ASEAN	Regional mediator	Consensus diplomacy	Code of Conduct negotiations
Japan	Middle power stabilizer	Capacity-building & aid	Maritime security assistance
India	Strategic partner	Indo-Pacific cooperation	Naval exercises, partnerships
Australia	Security contributor	Multilateral engagement	Joint patrols, surveillance

The table emphasizes the decentralized nature of governance, where competing actors have divergent goals, and where governance is no longer centralized.

Impact of Multipolarity on Maritime Security Stability

The results show that multipolarity has raised the level of deterrence and instability in maritime security. Multiple powers have meant that there was no one to dominate the South China Sea unilaterally. Multiple powers have meant that the South China Sea was not dominated by any single power. However, there has been a rise in the likelihood of conflict due to the overlapping military operations. China's militarization of artificial islands, comprising runways, missiles and radar installations, has greatly skewed the strategic balance. But the United States is still contesting these claims with naval patrol and alliance. This has resulted in a long-term problem of security where defensive moves of one state are seen as an attack of another state (Qader and Ashfaq, 2025).

Development	Actor	Impact on Governance
Artificial island construction	China	Increased militarization
FONOPs expansion	USA	Reinforcement of legal norms
Joint naval drills	ASEAN + partners	Confidence building
Coast guard expansion	Regional states	Increased surveillance capacity
Arms modernization	Multiple states	Security competition

The data indicates that there are deterrence tools, but they are not robust and need ongoing diplomatic involvement.

Effectiveness of Legal and Institutional Frameworks

The study revealed that international law, including UNCLOS, offers a sound normative framework but limited means of enforcement. The Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in 2016 was a milestone in the development of international law, but China rejected it, revealing the role of international law without enforcement. ASEAN institutions have also faced difficulties in drafting binding agreements. The long-awaited Code of Conduct (COC) talks reveal internal disagreements between member states, including claimant and non-claimant countries (Hassan, 2017).

Governance Mechanism	Strength	Weakness	Effectiveness Level
UNCLOS	Legal legitimacy	Weak enforcement	Moderate
PCA Ruling (2016)	Strong legal clarity	Non-binding enforcement	Low
ASEAN DOC (2002)	Diplomatic platform	Non-binding nature	Low
COC Negotiations	Potential future tool	Delayed progress	Uncertain

The evidence indicates that state behaviours are far removed from legal norms, notably in areas of conflict.

Role of Middle Powers in Stabilizing Governance

One of the important results is the rise of middle powers in the context of multipolarity in the context of maritime governance. In countries like Japan, India and Australia, there has been a rising trend of capacity enhancement, bilateral exercises and maritime domain awareness, by which they have become stabilizing actors. These states don't want to take over territories but want to ensure rules-based order. They have broadened the diplomatic arena for ASEAN states, offering choices over relying on the great powers (Dudovskiy, 2025).. For example:

- Japan gives out to Southeast Asian countries the coast guard ships and systems for surveillance.
- India is holding the Malabar naval exercises with the US and Japan.
- Australia is involved in maritime security training activities with ASEAN countries.

This moves towards diversifying partnerships for less reliance on one power and enhances regional resilience (Iqbal and Khan, 2025).

Economic and Strategic Interdependence

The study further shows that economic interdependence helps to the governance of the sea in two ways. Trade relations foster cooperation and they do lessen political confrontation. For most ASEAN countries, China continues to be their biggest trading partner, limiting the extent to which they can take a tough stance. Meanwhile, reliance on the international shipping routes through the South China Sea is a reason for everybody to keep avoiding a real conflict (Otani, 2020).

Country/Bloc	Trade Dependence on China	Security Alignment	Governance Position
Philippines	High	US alliance	Mixed balancing
Vietnam	High	Multi-alignment	Assertive defense
Malaysia	Very High	Neutral balancing	Diplomatic approach
ASEAN overall	High	Fragmented	Consensus-based
USA	Low	Regional alliances	Strategic deterrence

Environmental Governance Challenges

The South China Sea is also faced with high environmental stress, adding to the challenge of governance. Overfishing, destruction of coral reefs and illegal fishing are becoming more prevalent due to weak enforcement and overlapping claims. Indirectly, multipolarity has an impact on environmental governance through its impact on the fragmentation of regulatory authority. It is impossible for anyone organization to regulate sustainable fishing in all claimant areas. The study clearly illustrates that states can cooperate over the environment with a potential positive sum nature. Slightly there is some progress, joint marine conservation projects and fisheries management agreements (Matta, 2019).

Future Governance Scenarios

From the analysis, three scenarios are generated:

- **Scenario 1: Cooperative Multipolar Governance:** For the case, the states strengthen the mechanisms already set up by the ASEAN and agree on the binding Code of Conduct. Legal and diplomatic means are used to resolve maritime conflicts.
- **Scenario 2: Competitive Multipolarity:** In this area, US-China competition grows fiercer, with a split in governance and more militarization.
- **Scenario 3: Hybrid Governance Model:** A hybrid system is formed in which there is a division between cooperation in trading and contention in security in the environment (McManus, 2017).

Analysis

The results of this study reveal a complicated governance environment of the South China Sea due to multipolarity. The shift from unipolar to multipolar system has resulted in the emergence of more actors with an impact on the international system including the Chinese, the Americans, as well as some middle powers like Japan, India and Australia. This power apportionment has diminished the relative strength of one state over the other, and introduced some strategic rivalries and a lack of coherence in governance. The analysis indicates that there is enough legal and institutional mechanism which offers good normative guidance, yet limited capacity to implement the law and institutional arrangements, in particular under the UNCLOS and the mechanisms of the ASEAN. This power of an international law is going to come into use when China had refused to abide by an international law in 2016. Meanwhile, ASEAN member countries are split on how to handle the crisis, creating a challenge to respond more coordinated; ASEAN is thus a less effective regional governance body. However, stabilizing elements have been added to middle powers via diplomacy, maritime cooperation and capacity development initiatives. These move some way to resolve tensions and help to maintain the regional balance. This duality of stability and instability is created by the multipolarity. Thus, the South China Sea

has become a mere mirror of the power politicization and strategy-aims struggles among the countries in the competition to dominate the area (Cheng and Zeng, 2022).

Critical Analysis

Structural Weaknesses in Maritime Governance under Multipolarity

South China Sea's current governance is structurally weak in multipolarity based on research on governance mechanisms in the South China Sea. UNCLOS and international law generally form a formal legal regulatory structure for the control of maritime boundaries and activities but there is no mechanism to enforce the law. The Philippines v. China case in 2016 was one example in which China disregarded the ruling and the example demonstrated that legal 'authority is not enough' to force the compliance of powerful states. Multipolarity further complicates governance because it spreads governance between several actors and each of these has their own strategy. This spreading of powers tends to lead to disarrayed decision-making and lack of uniformity in policy implementation. The unity of the ASEAN, however, is a problem due to the differences of national interests between member countries, particularly among those promoting economic relationship with China. This fragmentation internally diminishes collective bargaining strength, and weakens regional diplomacy's effectiveness. Moreover, Chinese mode of governance in the South China Sea has been changing from cooperative governance to power-based governance by establishing artificial islands, expanding ship deployment, etc. This weakens the trust between and among stakeholders, and the effectiveness of institutional arrangements for peaceful dispute resolution (Zhang and Li, 2020).

Strategic Competition and the Limits of Institutional Cooperation

The other important issue is the strategic competition being more determinant than institutional cooperation in determining the outcomes of maritime governance. A Multipolar System is a system in which countries are motivated more by national security and geopolitical or strategic factors than by considerations of collective governance. As observed in the competition between China and USA to assert themselves in the region by maritime operations, alliance and deployments of their military forces. ASEAN even the proposed Code of Conduct is intended to provide promotions toward cooperation but only puts itself in the context of conflicting strategic agenda. At the middle level, nations such as Japan, India and Australia are significant facilitators of regional stability through joint cooperation in capacity development and joint exercises, but in less transformative ways. The decisions of the major powers will not be affected by them! Furthermore there is a paradox of governance that results as a consequence of economic interdependence. States can enhance ambiguity through chillier trade relations, too, given that a brisk approach would inevitably trigger counter-proliferation measures. Trade relations can be chilled, but also curtail states' resolve to pursue a tough stance on territorial issues. This creates a façade of "cooperation" in a governance environment while there is still a tension that is not resolved. The view of the critical analysis aquí presented suggest that multipolarity alone is not enough to produce effective maritime governance. Rather, it carves out a space of contestation, in which institutions, law and power politics play unevenly, which may undermine the governance system of the South China Sea as a whole (Carol-Dekker, 2018).

Future Implications

The rise of multipolarity in the Indo Pacific is likely to greatly influence the status of maritime governance in the South China Sea. The government system will become more complicated due to the multiplication of power in the hands of emerging middle powers such as the United States, China, and India. Allied to this is that the region will be guided more and more by a governance regime that encompasses legal, diplomatic and power-politics. In this type of system, international law (including UNCLOS) will have symbolic effects but will not be enforced.

The second is the ascendancy of middle powers in the balance of order in the sea. There is a prospect for further cooperation with other countries, like Japan and Australia, through maritime capacity-building, maritime surveillance and stepping-up of joint maritime training with ASEAN countries. India's rising great power projection Indo-Pacific policy also has potential to bring a balance of power as no single power should dominate. But these actors are not able to solve the complex sovereignty issues, nor will they be the ones to create stability: They will provide support instead of substantive participation in the complicated sovereignty issues. Huge – if a firm, binding Code of Conduct isn't achieved – one of the other key developments in the future is the ongoing militarization.

From the economic perspective, the South China Sea is an important global trade route, and it will likely play a key role in stability in the event of a large-scale war. States will not be likely to intervene in traffic flow on the water since the economic impact will be high. The economic interdependence can simultaneously be a hindrance to cooperation and not a foundation for it, and can even foster a less than cooperative "subliminal conflict" dynamic. Overfishing and the degradation of corals and the effects of climate change will create even greater governance challenges in the future regarding environmental issues. Without the better cooperation in the region, marine resource depletion may be an important cause of friction between claimant states. It offers a chance for "non-traditional" cooperation with -- in this instance -- environmental protection as a basis for limited cooperation. Future implications are that the South China Sea's governance is still in a state of flux and manageable, and the international governance regime is still multipolar where there is a balance between competition and cooperation between them (Gloria and Thu, 2026).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the governance of the South China Sea is in a transitional process amid the influence of multipolarization, and the sea area is evolving into a strategic focus and hotspot in the international world. This study examined the difference in the realm of maritime governance, legal order and security relationship, and regional co-operation in the South China Seas since its widespread development in multipolar international system. The results demonstrate two impacts of multipolarity: firstly, it has increased the power of the actors, which shape governance, and, secondly, it entails growing fragmentation, strategic rivalry and institutional weakness. This study showed that the governance of the South China Sea has gone away from the dominant power and a unified system of governance. Instead, it is shaped by the dynamic interplay of multiple actors: China, the USA, the ASEAN member countries, and emerging middle powers such as Japan, India and Australia. In each of these are their own strategic interests. Under the guise of freedom of navigation, the U.S. wants to maintain the rule-of-law international order and the sea is meant to remain free, while China wants territorial and maritime expansion and projections of infrastructure development. Meanwhile, ASEAN is trying to keep the region stable by engaging in diplomacy, but with divisions within. There is an appetite for Middle powers to play a part in capacity building and maritime security co-operation. The other finding is the continued importance of the existing mechanisms for maritime governance such as those under UNCLOS or ASEAN led ones, which remains limited and inadequate to manage current maritime conflicts. Maritime rights and maritime jurisdiction are well founded in UNCLOS, but enforcement is low on that (as is more the case in cases brought to questionable tribunals by significant powers, like the one that was heard in 2016). Again, ASEAN has not been very effective in developing consensus-based decisions that can lead to binding agreements, e.g., a fully effective Code of Conduct. This is a clear difference in norms and enforcement in the South China Sea.

Based on the research results, it has been shown that multipolarity has led to the competition in the area of security. Multiple major/mid power states makes itself felt with increased naval activity, geopolitical shifts and military modernization. Three or four great and intermediate powers have led to strategic alliances and naval activity, and to military modernization. These changes can reduce the impact of the power and stop it being taken over by one side, while also providing a possibility of misjudgments and potential clashes. This is a security environment of deterrence and tension, with the Freedom of Navigation Operations, as well as joint military drills and the activities of the coast guard, are growing. The study also shows there is a moderating effect of the lack of large-scale conflict because of economic interdependence. The South China Sea is a vital shipping and trading route for international shipping and the security of the sea area is key to the economic needs of regional and foreign countries. This relationship of dependence lends caution to the states even in political disturbances. This does not necessarily imply, however, more cooperation, since economic relations do not always go hand in hand with strategic competition and mistrust. Yet another significant finding of this study is the environmental problems. Concerns of overfishing, degradation of coral reefs and loss of marine resources are compounded by lack of good governance, and by overlapping jurisdictions over resource use. The non-conventional security threats highlight the need for finding alternative arrangements of collaborative governance, not just to territorially competing and military conflict. Potential for confidence building between rival states through cooperation in the environment exists, but is limited. The study suggests the maritime governance of the multipolar South China Sea appears to be 'cooperation-competition'. However, there are some institutional mechanisms such as UNCLOS and ASEAN that provide some norms, power politics or strategic rivalry of key actors severely affects their effectiveness. This implies geopolitics have more influence on governance processes than formal legal processes.

The study suggests that the future of the South China Sea's governance would also require regional and global actors to be able to cope with the competition and build institutional cooperation. If that continues, the area will remain in conflict, in the face of ongoing crisis situations, and undergoing some kind of cooperation in domains other than the classical security domain (environment, maritime security). But with dialogue, multilateralism and the respect of international norms, there can be a more stable and rules-based maritime order, albeit. Ultimately, multipolarity is not necessarily associated with stability or instability. Instead, it creates an institutionalized governance competition whereby institutional cooperation and power politics matters. Thus the fate of the South China Sea will serve as an important test case of what the viability of international law, regional diplomacy and regional balancing can be in a multipolar world.

The results of this study suggest that the South China Sea is regulated in a growing multipolar context, where China and the United States are the two great powers, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries, and the middle powers including Japan, India and Australia play their part. The findings of the study indicate that maritime governance is still difficult as the divergent national interests, competing strategic approaches, non-uniform application of international conventions like UNCLOS and divergent diplomatic priorities of the regional actors, characterize it. The conflict over China's 'island-building' operations and its growing military and economic presence have only added to the difficulties of regional governance and security worries. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies are advancing a rules-based maritime order through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and other security cooperation efforts that support regional peace and stability. The results also show the

importance of ASEAN in enabling dialogue, diplomacy and maritime governance, but also its limitations and weaknesses due to the different interests and the different commitment levels of the member countries.

Recommendations:

- Speed up the finalization of a legally binding Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.
- Improve compliance mechanisms under UNCLOS for increased enforcement.
- Advocate multilateral maritime cooperation to decrease risk of escalation.
- Enhance maritime situation awareness through co-operative surveillance.
- Promote confidence-building measures between China and the Asean.
- Increase middle powers' contribution to regional security cooperation.

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