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STRATEGIC TENSIONS IN SOUTH CHINA SEA: NAVIGATING US-CHINA-ASEAN POWER DYNAMICS

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Abstract
The South China Sea has become a powder keg where trade routes, national pride, and great power competition collide. What was once just another disputed territory has transformed into perhaps the most dangerous hotspot in today's global politics. This study examines how tensions have escalated in the region, particularly looking at China's increasingly bold moves, America's attempts to maintain balance, ASEAN's difficult position, and why international law seems powerless to resolve anything.
China justifies its sweeping territorial claims by reaching back into history and creatively interpreting legal precedents. Beijing has been steadily tightening its grip through building artificial islands, deploying fishing fleets that double as unofficial naval forces, and keeping everyone guessing about its true intentions. Even after flatly rejecting the 2016 international court ruling against its claims, China has only doubled down on its presence, presenting itself as both the rightful owner and natural leader of the region.
Meanwhile, the United States positions itself as the defender of "freedom of navigation" and international rules. But many see this as thinly veiled code for keeping China in check and maintaining American dominance across the Indo-Pacific. The rhetoric sounds noble, but the underlying motivation appears to be classic power politics.
ASEAN finds itself caught in the middle and struggling to speak with one voice. Countries like the Philippines want to take a harder line and push back through legal channels and diplomatic pressure. But other member states are reluctant to antagonize China, especially given how economically dependent they've become on their giant neighbor. This internal split leaves ASEAN looking weak and ineffective when it comes to actually resolving disputes or establishing clear rules.
International law, including UNCLOS and that 2016 arbitration decision, provides moral authority but little else. Without any real enforcement mechanism, legal rulings become mere talking points while the real action happens through gray-zone tactics, military posturing, and behind-the-scenes deals between unequal partners.
When you look at this through both realist and constructivist theoretical frameworks, you see a region driven by more than just material interests and military calculations. Historical grievances, national identity, and competing stories about who belongs where all play crucial roles. While China and the US engage in their strategic chess match, smaller countries try to hedge their bets – staying friendly with everyone while avoiding taking sides that might backfire.
Three scenarios seem possible going forward. First, we might see a tense but stable standoff managed through careful diplomacy and mutual deterrence. Second, things could spiral into actual conflict if someone miscalculates or misreads the situation. Third, and most optimistically, we might gradually see the development of genuine maritime cooperation and clearer legal frameworks that everyone can live with. Ultimately, the South China Sea serves as a crucial test case for whether rising powers and established ones can compete strategically without everything falling apart. The stakes couldn't be higher, and the margin for error keeps shrinking.
Keywords: *U.S. Indo-Pacific policy, ASEAN diplomacy, UNCLOS, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), gray-zone tactics, nine-dash line, island militarization, strategic chokepoints, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), maritime militia, international law, regional order, Realism, Constructivism*

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Research Questions

- How has China's behavior in the South China Sea evolved over time, and what does it say about its broader ambitions?
- Is the US presence in the region genuinely about protecting international law or is it part of a larger strategy to contain China?
- Are current tensions in the South China Sea more about hard power, or is it also a battle over influence, identity, and legitimacy?
- What role do international laws and agreements, like UNCLOS, really play in settling disputes or are they just symbolic in practice?
- How does geography like chokepoints and trade routes shape the strategic calculations of China, the US, and ASEAN?
- Is ASEAN still central to the regional order, or is it being sidelined by big power politics?
- Looking ahead, is a peaceful balance possible—or are we moving toward a new Cold War in the Indo-Pacific?

Problem Statement

The South China Sea has turned into a geopolitical tinderbox where competing national interests, historical grievances, and strategic ambitions meet head-on. What we're witnessing isn't just another territorial dispute—it's a fundamental challenge to how power operates in the 21st century. China's approach has shifted dramatically over the past decade. Beijing isn't just making claims anymore; it's actively reshaping the physical and political landscape through island construction, military installations, and an increasingly aggressive maritime presence. The question that keeps regional analysts up at night is whether this represents defensive moves to protect legitimate interests, or if we're seeing the early stages of a systematic campaign to establish Chinese hegemony over one of the world's most important waterways.

The American response adds another layer of complexity. Washington frames its involvement in terms of upholding international norms and protecting the freedom of navigation that global commerce depends on. Yet scratch beneath the surface, and it's hard to ignore that this also serves America's broader strategic goal of preventing any single power from dominating the Indo-Pacific. The rhetoric focuses on law and order, but the reality looks more like classic great power competition.

What makes this particularly fascinating—and dangerous—is how it's playing out on multiple levels simultaneously. Yes, there's the raw power politics of military deployments and territorial control. But there's also a deeper struggle over legitimacy, influence, and the very rules that govern international behavior. When China dismisses international tribunal rulings or when the U.S. conducts "freedom of navigation" operations, they're not just making tactical moves—they're making statements about whose authority matters and whose version of international law should prevail.

The geography itself amplifies every tension. We're talking about waters that carry roughly a third of global shipping, sit atop significant energy reserves, and connect the economies of half the world's population. A miscalculation here doesn't just affect regional players—it reverberates globally. Supply chains, energy markets, and economic growth patterns all hang in the balance.

Perhaps most telling is ASEAN's predicament. Here's an organization that was supposed to be the natural mediator and rule-setter for Southeast Asia, yet it finds itself increasingly sidelined by forces beyond its control. Some member states want to push back harder against Chinese expansion, while others worry about economic retaliation or getting caught in the crossfire of

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superpower rivalry. This internal paralysis raises uncomfortable questions about whether regional institutions can actually manage regional problems when the stakes get high enough.

So where does this leave us? This research digs into how we got here by tracing the evolution of Chinese strategy, examining the logic behind American engagement, testing whether international legal mechanisms still have teeth, and exploring how middle powers like ASEAN navigate between competing giants. The ultimate question isn't just academic—it's whether the international system can handle the rise of new powers without everything falling apart. The South China Sea might well be where we find out.

Introduction

China justifies its expanding South China Sea activities by pointing to what it calls an unbroken chain of historical control stretching back thousands of years. A 2016 government white paper makes this case explicitly, arguing that China has been managing these islands for over two millennia and that any disputes should be settled through direct bilateral talks—not through international courts or tribunals (State Council Information Office, 2016). When the Permanent Court of Arbitration delivered its damning verdict against China's claims that same year, Beijing's response was swift and dismissive. Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin didn't mince words, labeling the entire proceeding a "political farce" that willfully ignored historical realities and trampled on China's legitimate rights (Embassy of China in the Philippines, 2016).

But China's strategy goes well beyond angry press releases. Beijing has been methodically building facts on the ground—or rather, on the water. The construction and militarization of artificial islands, the deployment of fishing fleets that double as paramilitary forces, and the sophisticated use of information warfare through what's known as the "Three Warfares" doctrine all point to something more ambitious than simple territorial defense. This looks like a comprehensive effort to fundamentally alter the regional balance of power.

The United States tells a very different story about its role in these waters. American officials consistently frame their involvement as a principled defense of international law and freedom of navigation. Regular FONOPs and diplomatic statements emphasize Washington's commitment to UNCLOS principles and keeping vital shipping lanes open to all nations. Yet skeptics question whether this noble rhetoric masks a more traditional great power competition. The 2016 tribunal ruling has become a convenient legal justification for American operations, but the broader Indo-Pacific Strategy documents suggest something closer to a containment policy designed to prevent Chinese regional dominance (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

ASEAN finds itself in an impossible position, pulled between economic dependence on China and security relationships with the United States. Despite decades of diplomatic efforts—from the 2002 Declaration on Conduct to the still-unfinished Code of Conduct negotiations—the organization remains frustratingly divided. Claimant states like the Philippines want stronger pushback against Chinese expansion, while countries like Cambodia lean toward accommodating Beijing's preferences. This internal fragmentation has left ASEAN looking increasingly toothless. Some regional experts worry that the organization is becoming a bystander in its own backyard, reduced to issuing mild statements while the real decisions get made in Beijing and Washington (The Australian, 2020).

Understanding these dynamics requires looking through multiple theoretical lenses. Realist analysis helps explain the raw power calculations driving each side's behavior—this is classic great power competition playing out in a strategically vital region where the international system's anarchic nature forces states to prioritize their own security above all else. But realism alone doesn't capture the full picture. Constructivist insights reveal how deeply historical narratives,

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national identity, and competing ideas about legitimacy shape each actor's approach. China's claims aren't just about controlling territory; they're about reclaiming what Beijing sees as its rightful place in regional hierarchy. American involvement isn't just about maintaining military access; it's about defending a particular vision of international order.

This research tackles these complexities by combining careful analysis of official documents Chinese white papers, ASEAN declarations, U.S. strategy reports with detailed case studies of pivotal moments like island militarization campaigns and high-profile FONOPs. The goal isn't just to catalog what these major players are doing, but to understand the deeper motivations driving their actions and what those choices mean for the region's future stability. In a place where every move carries global implications, getting the analysis right matters more than ever.

Literature review

The academic conversation around the South China Sea keeps coming back to the same fascinating tension: how do you separate genuine legal claims from raw power politics when national pride and strategic interests are so deeply intertwined? What's particularly striking is how each major player has crafted their own narrative that somehow manages to sound both principled and self-serving at the same time.

China's entire approach hinges on what they call the "nine-dash line"—this somewhat mysterious cartographic creation that first appeared in 1947 under the Republic of China and was later inherited by the Communist government. Beijing presents this as the natural expression of over two millennia of Chinese maritime presence and administrative control in these waters (Fravel, 2011; State Council Information Office, 2016). It's a compelling historical narrative, but legal experts aren't impressed. They point out that whatever scattered activities China might reference from centuries past, they fall woefully short of the "continuous and effective control" that contemporary international law actually demands for territorial sovereignty (Beckman, 2013; Carpio, 2020). And honestly, when you look at the historical record, the gaps are pretty glaring.

Meanwhile, the United States has crafted what sounds like the most straightforward narrative of all: American naval presence and Freedom of Navigation Operations exist purely to defend UNCLOS principles, maintain open shipping lanes, and challenge excessive maritime claims (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). It's hard to argue with protecting international law, right? But scratch beneath the surface, and analysts suggest these legal arguments often serve as diplomatic cover for something much more traditional—classic great power balancing designed to prevent Chinese regional dominance, all neatly packaged within the broader Indo-Pacific strategy framework (Poling, 2020; Austin, 2024). The legal language sounds noble, but the underlying logic looks suspiciously like containment.

ASEAN's predicament might be the most frustrating to watch unfold. The organization keeps trying to position itself as the natural mediator and rule-setter for Southeast Asia, pointing to initiatives like the 2002 Declaration on Conduct and the seemingly never-ending Code of Conduct negotiations as proof of its diplomatic relevance (ASEAN Charter, 2008). But the reality on the ground tells a different story entirely. Internal divisions between member states, combined with China's increasingly sophisticated "divide-and-rule" tactics, have left ASEAN looking more like a debating society than an effective regional organization. The consensus-based decision-making that once seemed like such a strength now feels like a fatal weakness when quick, decisive action is desperately needed (Putra, 2024; Lai & Kuik, 2024).

What makes this whole dynamic more interesting is how individual ASEAN members have developed their own remarkably sophisticated strategies to navigate these impossible pressures. Take Indonesia, for example. When President Jokowi announced his ambitious "Global Maritime

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Fulcrum" vision back in 2014, it looked like Jakarta was finally ready to step up as a serious maritime power through enhanced fisheries protection, massive infrastructure development, naval modernization, and active maritime diplomacy (Widodo, 2014; Tiola, 2021; Gazard, 2025). But Indonesia's actual implementation has been far more nuanced than the grand rhetoric suggested. Jakarta has somehow managed to conduct assertive patrols around the Natuna Islands while simultaneously maintaining cooperative dialogue and economic partnerships with China. Some observers have started calling this approach "strategic ambiguity," and it's proving remarkably effective at protecting Indonesian interests without forcing uncomfortable choices (FT, 2024; Indonesia Financial Press, 2025; Laksmana, 2019).

Malaysia offers an equally fascinating but quite different case study. Rather than Indonesia's bold maritime vision, Kuala Lumpur has opted for what scholars like Yew Meng Lai and Kuik describe as "light-hedging" or "triadic diplomacy"—essentially a careful mix of quiet diplomacy, strategically worded legal protests, and selective shows of force (Putra, 2024; Parameswaran, 2016; Laia & Kuik, 2020). Malaysia will absolutely defend important economic assets like the Kasawari gas fields and submit diplomatic notes rejecting China's historical claims, but it does so in ways that avoid direct confrontation or economic retaliation (Reddit, 2020). It's actually quite impressive how they've managed to maintain sovereignty while protecting crucial economic relationships.

When you step back and look at these overlapping strategies. China's historical narratives, America's legal positioning, ASEAN's institutional struggles, and middle powers' diplomatic balancing acts some significant gaps in our understanding become apparent. Most existing scholarship does solid work analyzing the material aspects of this competition: military capabilities, economic dependencies, institutional structures, and so on. But there's still considerable room for deeper exploration of how **identity, norms, and geography** actually shape these strategic choices rather than just constraining them (Carpio, 2020; Poling, 2020).

This is where the real intellectual opportunity lies. By bringing together **Realist** insights about power competition with **Constructivist** analysis of how historical memory, legal legitimacy, and maritime identity influence policy-making, we can develop a much richer understanding of not just what's happening in the South China Sea, but why it's happening the way it is and what it might mean for regional stability going forward. The existing literature provides excellent building blocks, but there's still crucial work to be done in understanding how these different elements interact to shape both individual state strategies and the broader regional order. And frankly, given how much is at stake in these waters, getting that analysis right has never been more important.

Historical Context of the South China Sea Disputes

The South China Sea mess didn't just appear out of nowhere—it's been brewing for decades through a toxic mix of overlapping territorial claims, competing historical narratives, and constantly shifting geopolitical interests. And honestly, the more you dig into how we got here, the more you realize that today's tensions were probably inevitable given the fundamental contradictions at play.

China's sweeping claim to most of the South China Sea gets traced back to historical maps and ancient maritime expeditions, but the most concrete—and controversial—expression of this ambition is that infamous "nine-dash line." Originally published by the Republic of China back in 1947 and later inherited by the Communist government, this U-shaped boundary has become the centerpiece of Chinese territorial assertions (Fravel, 2011). Beijing's official narrative sounds compelling enough on paper—they argue that the islands and waters enclosed within this line have been integral Chinese territory for centuries, pointing to evidence of ancient maritime activities

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and administrative control (State Council Information Office, 2016). But when legal scholars actually examine these historical claims, they find them frustratingly ambiguous and lacking the continuous, effective control that modern international law actually requires (Beckman, 2013).

The whole situation really started heating up during the Cold War era. As countries like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia began asserting their own claims over various features—especially after UNCLOS came into effect in 1982—China started expanding its physical presence more aggressively. One of the first serious confrontations happened in 1988, when China and Vietnam clashed at Johnson South Reef, resulting in the deaths of Vietnamese sailors and China's control over several features in the Spratlys (Thao, 2012). Looking back, these incidents marked the beginning of what would become much more assertive Chinese behavior in the region, eventually escalating into the massive island-building and militarization projects we witnessed throughout the 2010s.

The real legal bombshell came in 2013, when the Philippines decided to take China to court under UNCLOS arbitration proceedings. The 2016 ruling from the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague was absolutely devastating for China's position—it invalidated Beijing's claim to historic rights within the nine-dash line and ruled that several features China claimed were legally just rocks or low-tide elevations that don't generate exclusive economic zones (PCA, 2016). The tribunal also found that China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights by interfering with fishing and oil exploration activities. But China's response was entirely predictable: they rejected the ruling outright and maintained that the tribunal had no jurisdiction over sovereignty issues anyway (Zou, 2017).

Since then, tensions have remained stubbornly high. The 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, ongoing harassment of Vietnamese and Malaysian drilling operations, and the constant presence of Chinese coast guard and militia vessels all demonstrate how gray-zone strategies have become the new normal in the region (Poling, 2020). Meanwhile, the militarization of features like Fiery Cross Reef and Subi Reef, both transformed into full-fledged military bases—shows how historical claims have evolved into very real strategic footholds (Hayton, 2014).

What's particularly fascinating is that this conflict over the South China Sea isn't really just about rocks and water anymore. It's become a fundamental clash between historical narratives and legal modernity, between unilateral assertions and multilateral norms. China's use of the nine-dash line to assert sweeping rights crashes directly into UNCLOS's framework for maritime entitlements, exposing just how limited international law can be when it comes to restraining powerful actors who simply choose not to comply.

As the situation continues to evolve, this historical context remains absolutely essential to understanding the underlying grievances, motivations, and possible pathways for either conflict or resolution. Because at the end of the day, everyone involved is fighting not just over territory, but over competing visions of how the international system should actually work.

Geostrategic importance

When you look at why everyone's so worked up about the South China Sea, it becomes pretty clear that this isn't just about national pride or abstract territorial claims. Ports, tankers, and navies converge in these waters not by accident, but because the region sits at the absolute center of global commerce, vital resources, and military power projection. And frankly, the numbers are staggering enough to make anyone pay attention.

Let's start with the obvious: this place is a **global trade artery** unlike any other. We're talking about roughly one-third of the world's maritime trade flowing through these waters—that's somewhere between $3-3.6 trillion annually, creating an economic pulse that connects East Asia

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to Europe, the Middle East, and beyond (UNCTAD; CSIS; Eurasia Review, 2024; Hellenic Shipping News, 2025). Nearly 28 million barrels of oil products cross this route every single day, accounting for around 37% of global seaborne petroleum shipments (Eurasia Review, 2024). This maritime highway links the Pacific with the Indian Ocean through strategic chokepoints like the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok straits, making any serious disruption here essentially a global alarm bell (Eurasia Review, 2024; Larres, 2024).

But the economic significance goes way beyond just shipping lanes. The **rich fisheries and energy reserves** beneath these waves represent another crucial dimension of the region's importance. The South China Sea supplies about 10% of global fish stocks, that's critical protein for hundreds of millions of people in Southeast Asia (World Fisheries Review; WGI, 2024). And then there's what's buried under the seabed: an estimated 11 billion barrels of oil and up to 266 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, concentrated especially north of Borneo, east of the Malay Peninsula, and off Palawan (WGI, 2024; Eurasia Review, 2024). Recent discoveries suggest the region might also be rich in rare earth minerals used in high-tech devices and electric vehicles, which has only intensified both economic and strategic competition (Indian Express, 2024; Wikipedia, 2025).

Then there's the **military and surveillance dimension**, which adds yet another layer of strategic complexity to an already complicated situation. China's construction of anti-stealth radars and missile systems on features like Triton Island dramatically enhances its ability to monitor and potentially control vast maritime areas (The Guardian, 2024). The U.S. response has been equally serious, regularly deploying aircraft carriers and conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations to assert legal norms and prevent any single power from achieving unchecked military dominance (Time, 2016). Even external powers like the EU have gotten involved, deploying naval visits and providing satellite support to uphold maritime rules and demonstrate that this isn't just a regional issue (AP, 2022).

What makes all this particularly nerve-wracking is how these different strategic dimensions reinforce each other. Control over shipping lanes affects global trade flows. Access to energy resources influences regional power balances. Military positioning shapes diplomatic negotiations. It's all interconnected in ways that make the South China Sea much more than just a collection of disputed islands—it's become a genuine linchpin of global trade, a reservoir of critical food and energy resources, and a theater for military signaling all at the same time.

These overlapping stakes help explain why this region has become so central to both economic stability and geopolitical rivalry, and why any serious misstep here could send shockwaves far beyond regional waters. When you've got this much economic activity, this many critical resources, and this level of military attention all concentrated in one area, the potential for miscalculation or escalation becomes genuinely scary.

US and China's interests and behaviors

What's really striking about the South China Sea standoff is how both superpowers have developed such sophisticated, multi-layered strategies that go way beyond simple military posturing. China's approach, in particular, reflects a genuinely determined push to build authentic **maritime power** by blending hard assets with legal narratives and influence operations in ways that are honestly pretty impressive from a strategic perspective.

Since around 2013, China has dramatically ramped up its coast guard and maritime law enforcement agencies, which now operate under the Central Military Commission with vessels capable of up to 12,000 tons displacement—enabling sustained "rights protection" patrols around disputed features like Scarborough Shoal (Luo & Panter, 2021; Erickson, 2024). But here's where it gets really interesting: complementing this official presence, China's maritime militia consists

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of thousands of fishing vessels organized under the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) that often act in quasi-military roles to shape control of contested waters. Scholars have started calling this "cabbage" or gray-zone operations, and it's proving remarkably effective (Konishi, 2018; Ngo, 2020).

This strategic combination of **island militarization, maritime militia, and coast guard activity** creates multiple layers of de facto control that are incredibly difficult to challenge. Islands like Fiery Cross and Subi Reef have been completely transformed into military bases, complete with advanced radars and runways that extend China's air defense and surveillance reach deep into the South China Sea (O'Rourke, 2022). Meanwhile, the maritime militia reinforces these gains by escorting coast guard vessels and systematically harassing foreign ships near contested areas like the Second Thomas and Scarborough Shoals (Erickson, 2019; Wikipedia, 2023).

What makes China's strategy particularly sophisticated is how tightly these maritime ambitions connect to the broader **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**. As a key pillar of the "maritime Silk Road," the BRI invests heavily in port infrastructure and naval support facilities across Southeast Asia, creating potential supply hubs for China's blue-water navy while reinforcing Beijing's claim to "maritime rights and interests" (Army University Press, 2021; Fletcher & Hart, 2024). And scholars are increasingly recognizing that these investments aren't just economic—they represent deliberate steps toward extending China's strategic and logistical footprint into international waters (Erickson, 2021).

The American response has been equally thoughtful, though quite different in approach. U.S. policy in the South China Sea is grounded in a **dual strategy of upholding legal norms while systematically balancing Chinese influence**. Washington regularly conducts **Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)**, challenging excessive maritime claims in the name of UNCLOS, even though the U.S. itself isn't actually a signatory to demonstrate that these waters should remain open under customary international law (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). But FONOPs represent more than just legal principle; they serve as highly visible reminders of American commitment to a rules-based maritime order.

Beyond this legal warfare, the U.S. has steadily deepened **alliances and partnerships** in what analysts call a "latticework" strategy. Washington has strengthened ties with the Philippines, Japan, Australia, and others through expanded military exercises, Reciprocal Access Agreements, and defense modernization programs—signaling mutual deterrence and a collective ability to resist coercion in the region (Time, 2024; Erickson, 2019; Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, 2022).

This network forms a critical part of the broader **Indo-Pacific Strategy**, which aims to maintain what officials call a free, open, and resilient regional order rooted in democratic values and international norms (WorldJPN, 2022). The strategy also features strong support for ASEAN centrality, maritime capacity-building initiatives like the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (SAMSI), and bolstered Coast Guard cooperation through USCG cutter deployments and equipment transfers (Erickson, 2019).

When you step back and look at the bigger picture, China's strategy harmonizes maritime expansion, militia-based gray-zone tactics, island militarization, and soft power projection through the BRI into a remarkably coherent whole. The U.S. approach marries legal assertion through FONOPs with regional balancing via alliances and strategic infrastructure investments. Together, these competing efforts illustrate an increasingly tense maritime contest—one defined not only by military presence, but by competing narratives of law, legitimacy, and great-power ambition.

What's particularly fascinating is how both sides have essentially created parallel systems of control and influence that rarely clash directly but constantly compete for regional legitimacy and

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strategic advantage. It's a masterclass in modern great power competition, but also a recipe for potential miscalculation if either side misreads the other's intentions or capabilities.

ASEAN's Role and Strategic Dilemma

ASEAN's role in the South China Sea reveals a delicate balancing act as a regional bloc caught between competing powers, it aims for unity yet remains deeply divided. The Philippines, especially under President Marcos Jr., has pushed forcefully for a **binding Code of Conduct (COC)**, citing rising incidents like water cannon and ramming episodes as urgent calls to action (Marcos, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Yet behind this push, countries like Cambodia align more closely with China, creating internal contradictions that slow progress (ASEAN wiki, 2025).

Despite agreeing in principle to finalize a COC by 2026, member states struggle over **legal status, geographic scope, and enforcement provisions** a stalemate that ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn describes as "not static, not standstill" (VOA News, 2024; Reuters, 2024). These delays underscore the **limitations of consensus** in a bloc where non-claimant members worry more about economic ties than territorial disputes (Gadjah Mada expert, 2024).

ASEAN acts as a hedger acknowledging the benefits of Chinese investment in infrastructure and trade, while also reaffirming ties to the U.S. through mechanisms like the Quad and joint military exercises (AP, 2025; Reuters, 2025). The bloc's public declarations call for peaceful resolution, upholding UNCLOS, and mutual self-restraint, but the **absence of enforcement mechanisms** limits their real-world impact (Asia Times, 2024; AA, 2025).

This scenario illustrates ASEAN's paradox: it remains **central in principle**, often cited by external powers as a key partner, yet its **internal divisions** and slow institutional processes frequently prevent it from shaping outcomes. While the bloc's unity re-emerges in crises like joint statements following Chinese harassment of fishermen these moments are more reactive than proactive, highlighting its ongoing struggle to exercise meaningful regional leadership.

Power Dynamics and Strategic Tensions

The military buildup in the South China Sea has reached a point where it's impossible to ignore. China has been steadily positioning advanced naval assets throughout the region, submarines, destroyers, and amphibious vessels, while the United States and its allies maintain their presence through regular patrols, joint exercises, and aircraft carrier operations (O'Rourke, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). In this environment, even routine activities like aircraft landings or drone launches take on significant geopolitical implications. What emerges is a precarious balance that feels like watching a high-stakes chess match play out across the waters.

Beyond the obvious military presence, China has been employing what experts call gray-zone tactics and hybrid strategies. Maritime militia and coast guard vessels regularly tail Southeast Asian ships, creating pressure and attempting to influence behavior without crossing the line into outright aggression (Erickson & Collins, 2022). The 2024 incident at Vanguard Bank serves as a perfect example—when a Vietnamese supply ship nearly collided with a Chinese maritime militia vessel, it showed just how quickly these pressure tactics can turn dangerous (Reuters, 2024). These operations exist in a murky space between peace and conflict, where China can apply leverage while still claiming it's not being aggressive.

This kind of ambiguous behavior creates genuine worries about accidental escalation. All it would take is one misunderstood move a radar lock-on, ships getting too close, or someone misreading signals and the situation could spiral well beyond what anyone intended. A 2023 analysis from the Center for Naval Analyses pointed out that without proper "deconfliction protocols" or emergency communication channels, these routine patrols are essentially accidents waiting to happen (Martinez, 2023).

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Caught in this tense environment, Southeast Asian nations find themselves making difficult strategic choices. They can either try to balance the powers by explicitly siding with one bloc to counter the other, or they can bandwagon by aligning with whoever seems stronger to avoid confrontation altogether. The Philippines under President Marcos Jr. has clearly chosen the balancing approach, strengthening defense partnerships with the U.S. and Japan, while countries like Malaysia and Indonesia seem more inclined toward bandwagoning, accepting Chinese infrastructure investments as a way to maintain peace (Putra, 2024; Widodo, 2024). Vietnam has taken perhaps the most interesting approach, building up its coast guard and marine capabilities while carefully maintaining diplomatic relationships with both Washington and Beijing (Tran, 2023).

Diplomatic and Legal Instruments

Maritime disputes don't usually get settled through military force alone. In the South China Sea, traditional diplomacy and legal frameworks, while far from perfect it still play a crucial role in preventing things from spiraling out of control and maintaining some semblance of regional stability.

The bedrock of all this is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which serves as the global rulebook for maritime rights. UNCLOS lays out how coastal nations can claim their territorial waters, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and continental shelves. It's basically the standard we use to judge whether maritime claims are legitimate or not, particularly when it comes to features like reefs and rocks that don't automatically grant full sovereignty rights (Beckman, 2013; Tanaka, 2017).

Back in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) handed down a major ruling that sided with the Philippines. The court made it clear that China couldn't claim "historic rights" within that famous nine-dash line, classified many of the disputed features as unable to generate EEZs, and found Beijing guilty of illegally interfering with Philippine resource exploration (PCA, 2016). While this ruling provided much-needed legal clarity, its real-world impact has been largely symbolic. China simply dismissed the decision and kept doing what it was doing—reinforcing its outposts, running military exercises, and deploying vessels throughout the region (Zou, 2017; Poling, 2020).

Where legal mechanisms have struggled, ASEAN's broader diplomatic efforts have shown more promise. Various forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting–Plus (ADMM-Plus) provide spaces where both claimant and non-claimant countries can air their grievances, express concerns, and publicly commit to resolving disputes peacefully (Acharya & Dewitt, 2019). Take 2024, for instance—the ARF set up a working group focused on preventing accidental naval encounters, prioritizing practical conflict prevention over ambitious legal solutions (ARF, 2024). Similarly, ADMM-Plus runs annual joint maritime exercises specifically designed to improve search-and-rescue cooperation, deliberately building trust through collaboration rather than confrontation

Theoretical Analysis

The South China Sea dispute essentially reads like a textbook example of Realism in international relations. From this perspective, countries operate in a chaotic international system where there's no higher authority to guarantee anyone's security. Power and survival become the main drivers of behavior, and when you look at how China, the United States, and ASEAN interact, this theory fits almost perfectly.

China's behavior about building artificial islands, developing military bases, and running aggressive coast guard patrols follows a clear realist playbook: secure maritime control to protect

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national interests and keep rivals at bay (O'Rourke, 2023). This isn't just about expanding for the sake of looking powerful; it's strategic thinking. China wants to create a buffer zone, push the U.S. further from its coastline, and control the crucial sea lanes that carry its energy imports and global trade. For China, the South China Sea functions as both defensive shield and offensive weapon. When Chinese forces used water cannons against Filipino vessels near the Second Thomas Shoal in February 2024, it was a carefully calculated display of dominance—aggressive enough to make a point, but controlled enough to avoid triggering a full-scale conflict (Reuters, 2024).

The United States operates from the same realist mindset. Its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), expanded defense agreements (like the 2023 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Philippines), and increased naval presence in the Indo-Pacific aren't just about upholding international law, they're about containing China's rise and reassuring allies that America still has their backs (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Washington sees the South China Sea as part of a much larger strategic competition. If Beijing dominates this region, it might signal to allies that the U.S. can no longer guarantee regional security, which explains America's complex web of alliances and partnerships across the Indo-Pacific (Grossman, 2021).

ASEAN finds itself trapped in what realists call a **security dilemma**. Countries like Vietnam and the Philippines strengthen defense ties with the U.S. to counter China, while others like Cambodia quietly side with Beijing in exchange for economic support (Lai & Kuik, 2020). This internal split creates strategic paralysis within the bloc. Even when the Philippines speaks out against China's incursions, other members stay silent or dilute joint statements because national survival and state interests trump collective unity (Putra, 2024).

But Realism doesn't capture the whole picture. Constructivism helps explain not just what countries do, but why they see the world the way they do. China's assertiveness isn't only about resources or military positioning, it's deeply shaped by historical grievances and national identity. The "century of humiliation" and narratives about rightful maritime heritage make backing down politically impossible for Beijing. When Chinese leaders talk about "indisputable sovereignty," they're not just making legal arguments, they're drawing on a deeply embedded historical narrative that resonates with the Chinese people (State Council, 2016; Zhang, 2021).

For ASEAN, principles like "non-interference" and "peaceful dispute resolution" aren't just diplomatic buzzwords, they're core to the bloc's identity, forged in the aftermath of Cold War divisions and ethnic conflicts (Acharya, 2014). These shared norms help explain why ASEAN refuses to take sides, preferring consensus over confrontation even when sovereignty is at stake. During the 2024 ARF Summit, ASEAN avoided directly condemning China despite repeated maritime incidents, instead choosing to reaffirm "dialogue and mutual respect" as their guiding principles (ARF, 2024).

Realism explains the mechanics, power-seeking, balancing, hedging. Constructivism explains the deeper meaning behind those actions, showing how countries interpret threats and legitimacy through the lens of identity, history, and shared norms. Put together, these theories give us a more complete picture of a region caught between fear, ambition, and deeply held beliefs.

Future Scenarios and Strategic Implications

Where things go from here, whether we see peaceful management or violent confrontation won't just depend on diplomacy or naval power. It comes down to the choices that China, the U.S., ASEAN, and other key players make over the next few years.

If we're optimistic, current tensions could slowly evolve into something more cooperative. Maybe China dials back its more aggressive tactics due to economic pressures or shifts in domestic priorities, and finally agrees to a **binding and enforceable Code of Conduct** with ASEAN by

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2026, even if they're not thrilled about it (VOA News, 2024). We might see confidence-building measures actually take hold: joint patrols, systems for reporting incidents, and cooperative fisheries zones. The fact that China and the Philippines recently restored their Coast Guard communication lines after that February 2024 water cannon incident suggests this kind of diplomatic progress is possible (Reuters, 2024). Even U.S.-China naval encounters could become more manageable through better military-to-military dialogue, which would help reduce the chances of accidental escalation (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

But there's an equally realistic worst-case scenario that's becoming more worrying. Aggressive nationalism, miscalculations at sea, or just an unintended collision could send things spiraling quickly. Picture a Chinese vessel actually colliding with a Philippine resupply ship near Second Thomas Shoal, or a U.S. Navy aircraft getting harassed over Mischief Reef. Without proper mechanisms to defuse these situations, **escalation could happen faster than diplomacy can keep up** (Martinez, 2023). In this scenario, ASEAN might completely fracture, with countries like Cambodia or Laos openly backing China while others like Vietnam and the Philippines deepen their military partnerships with the U.S. Southeast Asia could end up looking like Cold War-era Europe, a region divided into opposing camps.

Most likely, though, we're looking at a **middle-ground scenario**: a tense but stable status quo that drags on indefinitely. China will probably keep using gray-zone tactics, gradually expanding its presence through coast guard patrols, maritime militia, and infrastructure projects. The U.S. will continue its Freedom of Navigation Operations while strengthening alliances through the Quad and AUKUS. ASEAN will keep holding meetings and issuing statements, but will struggle to actually influence outcomes because of **institutional limitations and internal divisions** (Acharya, 2014; Lai & Kuik, 2020).

The **strategic implications** of whichever path we take extend far beyond the South China Sea itself. In the best case, multilateral frameworks gain credibility, UNCLOS gets reinforced, and the Indo-Pacific remains a space for peaceful competition rather than armed conflict. In the worst case, a regional clash could devastate global trade, destabilize energy routes, and drag in outside powers—potentially leading the world toward a **fragmented, insecure maritime order**. The 2023 Red Sea drone attacks already demonstrated how quickly maritime instability can disrupt global commerce; something similar happening in the South China Sea would be orders of magnitude more devastating (Eurasia Review, 2024).

ASEAN's future really hangs in the balance here. If the bloc can use its existing platforms like ADMM-Plus and the East Asia Summit to actually institutionalize crisis management and push for genuine regional leadership, it might regain relevance. But if it keeps failing to form unified responses, especially during critical moments, ASEAN risks getting diplomatically sidelined—offering symbolic unity without any real strategic impact (Putra, 2024; ARF, 2024).

Conclusion

The South China Sea represents far more than just a disputed stretch of water—it's essentially a mirror that reflects the deeper shifts in global power, competing ideas about international order, and the growing tension between working together and facing off. This research has examined how China's maritime expansion, America's strategic balancing act, and ASEAN's struggle to stay relevant all feed into a complex and often fragile regional situation. While each player pursues its own interests, their choices get shaped by fears, ambitions, and deeply embedded historical narratives.

What happens in these waters has implications that stretch far beyond the region itself. The South China Sea has become a proving ground for the future of international norms, the strength of

multilateral diplomacy, and whether rising and established powers can coexist without sliding into open conflict. The risk of miscalculation is very real—but so is the potential for peaceful management, if trust and restraint can somehow be rebuilt.

Moving forward, the path ahead requires acknowledging strategic realities while doubling down on diplomatic efforts. Lasting peace won't emerge from one side dominating the other, but from sustained dialogue—through more balanced power relationships, stronger mechanisms to prevent conflicts, and a shared commitment to keeping maritime spaces open, secure, and sustainable. If the region's leaders can choose pragmatism over provocation, and dialogue over deterrence, the South China Sea might transform from just another flashpoint into a model for managing great power competition in our increasingly multipolar world.

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