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Power Contestation and the Future of the Western Security Order: Evaluating Freedom of Navigation Conflicts in the South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

The confrontations in the South China Sea have far-reaching implications for the stability of the Western security order. Major powers, particularly the United States, have conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to challenge China's excessive maritime claims. The destabilizing effects of this confrontation extend beyond the South China Sea. The Western security order, which relies on a rules-based international system and the peaceful resolution of disputes, is at risk as China's actions undermine the established norms and principles. The assertiveness in the South China Sea challenges the authority of international law and raises concerns about China's intentions in other regions. Addressing the confrontation over freedom of navigation requires a concerted effort to uphold the principles of the Western security order. This Research explores the Power Contestation in between the Major Powers. The research methodology for this research involve a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. This study also used both Primary and secondary methods to collect data and In-depth interviews were used to collect qualitative data from individual stakeholders, military officials then it was analyzed. Diplomatic engagement, adherence to international law, and the establishment of mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution are essential. This Research is crucial to work towards a regional framework that respects the freedom of navigation and preserves the stability of the Western security order.

Keywords: South China Sea, Western Security Order, Freedom of Navigation (FONOPs), Power Contestation, International Law.

Introduction

South China Sea has been the disputed water since long among China and South East Asian states. As it carries important trade routes, sea lanes and precious resources 'Freedom of navigation' in the South China Sea is an indication of great power complicity and US involvement in the conflicting water is the evidence of it. Freedom of navigation issue in SCS is boosting great power involvement. This rivalry between China and US will have far reaching implications on global security. Now this study would be conducted to enlighten new dynamics of the regional and major powers involved in igniting rivalries among SCS and major powers through FON. It would also examine the alliance shift of AUKUS and Quad, Indian naval program and US China trade war in the SCS region from new dimension.

The conflict in the South China Sea is a complicated and protracted disagreement that is centered on contradictory jurisdictional rights and the essential matter of freedom of navigation. China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and other nations all have conflicting claims to the conflicted Sea, a strategically significant area. The maintenance of

FON, a cornerstone of international law that guarantees unhindered access to major marine routes, is at the core of this struggle. This conflict has garnered significant attention due to its geopolitical implications, impact on regional stability, and potential consequences for international trade and security.

China has substantial maritime claims in the South China Sea, principally based on its historical interpretation of the "nine-dash line." Nearly all of the islands, reefs, and ocean surrounding this area are under China's claim of ownership. Ancient maps and papers, China says, show China's uninterrupted presence and sovereignty over the area, lending credence to Chinese claims. China has taken forceful measures to back up its rights, which center on the country's historical entitlements and authority over the contested features. Building artificial islands, deploying armed forces, and acquiring administrative control over contested territories are all examples of such measures.

Realism is the Best interpretation of the conflict between China and the United States in the South China Sea. For the US, its existence in the region and its support for its allies and partners, including the Philippines and Japan, is seen as a way to balance Chinese growing power and ensure its own security and survival. For China, its claims and actions in the SCS are driven by its own pursuit of power and security. China views the region as strategically important for its energy and trade interests and sees control of the South China Sea as key to securing its own survival. China's assertive actions in the region, including the building of military installations, are seen by some as a way to challenge the dominance of the United States and assert China's own power and influence.¹

From the US perspective, the presence of China in the SCS, and its assertive actions in building military installations and making territorial claims, is viewed as a potential danger to US interests and security in the region. This has led the US to adopt a more assertive posture in the region, including increasing its military presence, conducting freedom of navigation operations, and providing support to its allies and partners in the region. From the Chinese perspective, the American military existence in the region, and its support for its allies and partners, is viewed as a challenge to China's interests and security in the region.

In secondary research methods, literature review involved analyzing academic literature on the topic of freedom of navigation and the South China Sea conflict, it identified key themes and trends, and assess the validity and reliability of existing research. Document analysis involved analyzing government reports, news articles, and other documents related to the conflict.

The population in this study includes various groups of stakeholders who are involved or have an interest in the issue. This may include:

- i. Government officials and policymakers.
- ii. Military personnel and security experts
- iii. Diplomats and international organizations.
- iv. Scholars and experts in international relations, security studies, and political science who study the Western security order and its impact on regional and global stability.

A purposive sample of experts on the SCS conflict, including academics, journalists, and think tank scholars who have expertise in the Western security order and international relations, are selected to provide insights and perspectives. Sample of military and naval security experts are selected, and then a purposive sample of scholars and experts on the SCS conflict is added.

¹ Alenezi, Danah Ali. "US Rebalance Strategy to Asia and US-China Rivalry in South China Sea from the Perspective of the Offensive Realism." *Review of Economics and Political Science* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (2020)

- i. Interview: In this research in-person interviews had been conducted to collect data. Firstly, the interview of "Lieutenant Commander Adnan Mir PN" has been taken. He has served for 12 years in Pakistan Navy. Secondly, the interview of "Captain Ghulam Akbar" who is an ex-naval Attaché China has been taken. Interview questions has been prepared and was asked from the interviewee at the time of interview and the answers of those question would be included in the analysis chapter.
- ii. Document analysis: Analysis of official documents such as government reports, policy documents, and legal documents provided insights into the history and evolution of the conflict, as well as the legal and diplomatic framework surrounding the issue.
- iii. Secondary data analysis: Secondary data analysis in this research involves analyzing existing datasets that are relevant to the topic, such as news articles, academic publications, and other publicly available data sources. This provided a broader perspective on the conflict.

Confrontation over the 'freedom of navigation' in South China Sea destabilizes the stability of the Western security order.

The objectives of this study would be:

- i. To explore initiatives by US, China, UK to uphold their interest on the SCS.
- ii. To critically analyze the great power collision is hindering principle of freedom of Navigation for exploiting SCS Conflict.
- iii. To determine the implication of this conflict on Global Security.

This research adds to existing literature by filling the knowledge gap regarding the liberal principle of freedom of Navigation through the lens of Offensive Realism. Freedom of Navigation is the most important gap to address in the treaties concerning the South China Sea conflict. This research will assist to enhance the knowledge of future researchers regarding FON in South China Sea as the power and alliance shift in the region, the significance of major powers US, UK and China's involvement in the South China Sea would have interrelated effects on the geopolitics of the region and may provide grounds for great powers confrontations.

FON is an odd topic to argue about because every country, particularly China, is a strong supporter of it. China wants unhindered commerce across these waterways more than anybody else, according to Chinese President Xi Jinping, who stated in 2015. "There has been no difficulty with the freedom of navigation and over flight; and there won't be any in the future".²

India sees the underlying importance of rules concerning order and the specific issue of passage between the Indian and Pacific oceans as being crucial to its own strategic interests, despite the fact that it is not a South China Sea coastal state. The authors have evaluated the justifications and consequences of India's plans and responses with regard to the South China Sea issue, as well as their effects on its wider "Act East" agenda in Southeast Asia strategy.³

According to Prime Ministers Johnson, Morrison, and Biden AUKUS is an "increased trilateral security relationship,". The new alliance development to transfer nuclear maritime equipment, advanced artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum, and submarine facilities including undersea sensors and drones to Australia elevates crucial considerations for China. The naval security vibrant in the Asia Pacific region may face political concerns once Australia gains nuclear-

²Smith, Jeff M. "Freedom of Navigation: A Critical Security Imperative." Orfonline.org, February 8, 2017. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/freedom-of-navigation-a-critical-security-imperative/>.

³ Chakraborti, Tridib, Mohor Chakraborty, and Sudhir T. Devare. *India's Strategy in the South China Sea*. London, England: Taylor & Francis, 2022

powered submarine capabilities, even though AUKUS is still a long-term project.⁴ The creation of the Quad grouping, have brought the US, Japan, Australia, and India around each other, shows that there exists a progressing faith among so many other substantial nations in the region to create strong protection abilities and collaboration. Geopolitical and trade experts continue to be anxious about the South China Sea that these collisions may result in closing of commercial shipping and may require sailors to navigate via Australia's southern coastline. The worldwide supply chain would experience a delay of several weeks as a result. In this fictitious scenario, the loss of marine access owing to farther ports would change the costs of international trade.⁵

The AUKUS-Quad story still has a great deal of promise to maintain EU presence in the Asia Pacific. Despite these differences, it's crucial to keep in mind that everyone involved is ultimately focused on promoting a rules-based, democratic, and open maritime order. This is necessary to ensure a unified front against authoritarian and unilateral actions by states that jeopardize the Asia Pacific region's stability.⁶

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Freedom of Navigation and International Law

A key tenet of international law, freedom of navigation, guarantees unrestricted travel by ships and aircraft throughout the world's waters and skies. It encompasses the right of all nations to navigate freely, without interference, within the territorial waters and international waters of other countries. Freedom of navigation is crucial for global trade and economic prosperity. Approximately 90% of global trade is transported by sea, making maritime routes the lifeblood of the global economy. By allowing ships to navigate freely, countries promote the efficient movement of goods and resources, enabling trade to flourish. This free flow of commerce encourages economic growth, enhances market access for businesses, and creates employment opportunities worldwide. The principle of freedom of navigation plays a vital role in maintaining peaceful international relations.⁷ It helps prevent conflicts and tensions that could arise from the restrictions or denial of access to maritime and airspace routes. When countries respect and uphold this principle, it fosters stability, cooperation, and mutual trust among nations. Freedom of navigation is closely tied to national security and defense. Naval forces require unrestricted access to international waters to protect a country's interests and ensure the safety of its citizens. The ability to deploy and maneuver naval assets is vital for responding to security threats, conducting humanitarian operations, and deterring potential aggressors.

⁴ Khan, Muhammad Usama. "AUKUS and Its Implications on Maritime Security." Geopolitical Monitor, March 15, 2022. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/aukus-and-its-implications-on-maritime-security/>.

⁵ Khan, Muhammad Usama. "AUKUS and Its Implications on Maritime Security." Geopolitical Monitor, March 15, 2022. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/aukus-and-its-implications-on-maritime-security/>.

⁶ HCSS. "Between AUKUS and the Quad: Scaling European Interest in the Indo-Pacific." The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, February 15, 2022. <https://hcss.nl/report/between-aukus-and-the-quad/>.

⁷ Bateman, Sam. "Freedom of Navigation and the Law of the Sea." *Asia & the Pacific Policy Society*, January 20, 2020.

Freedom of navigation is rooted in the fundamentals of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS recognizes the right of all states to navigate freely in international waters and ensures the protection of navigation-related rights and freedoms. Upholding freedom of navigation demonstrates a commitment to the rule of law and the principles of fairness and equality among nations. UNCLOS, which was adopted in 1982 and has been ratified by the vast majority of countries, provides a comprehensive legal framework governing the rights and responsibilities of states in maritime spaces.⁸

Under UNCLOS, all states, regardless of their size or military strength, have the right to navigate freely on the vast oceans, which are beyond the territorial waters of any nation. The high seas are considered international waters, and all states enjoy the freedom of navigation, overflight, and other related rights. This freedom includes the ability to engage in military operations, scientific research, commercial shipping, and exploration for resources such as fisheries, minerals, and hydrocarbons. Here are important components of freedom of navigation mentioned in UNCLOS.

Innocent passage:

By "innocent passage," the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) means that foreign ships may sail freely and without interference through the territorial sea of a coastal state so long as they do not threaten or use force against, or otherwise contravene, the laws and regulations of that state.⁹ To respect the rights of navigation of other nations, the principle of innocent passage rests on the premise that coastal governments have the capacity to regulate and enforce laws inside their territorial seas.

For an innocent passage to be granted, foreign ships must transit the territorial sea without causing any extra delays or making any unwarranted stops. The passage should be unbroken and uninterrupted, barring emergency situations or the requirement to adhere to the rules and regulations of the state along the coast. During innocent passage, foreign ships shall not do anything that could be seen as an attack on the sovereignty, security, or peace of the coastal state. They should also refrain from doing anything that can damage the marine ecosystem, such as littering or illegal fishing. Foreign ships that are practicing innocent passage are subject to the jurisdiction of the coastal state.¹⁰ These regulations may include navigational and safety requirements, environmental protection measures, and customs and immigration procedures. However, such laws and regulations must be consistent with international law and should not - +unjustifiably interfere with innocent passage. Coastal states have the right to establish specific regulations and conditions for innocent passage in certain areas, such as military zones, archipelagic waters, or areas of particular environmental sensitivity. These regulations should be reasonable and not discriminate against ships of any particular nationality. Additionally, coastal states have the authority to temporarily suspend innocent passage in situations of national security or during times of armed conflict.¹¹

Transit Route:

The term "transit Route" is used to describe the privilege of using international straits and other similar waterways for international shipping. International straits are the narrow

⁸ Merdekawati, Agustina, and Marsudi Triatmodjo. "Equity Interest Scheme's Compatibility with the UNCLOS 1982's Common Heritage of Mankind Principle." *LAW REFORM* 18, no. 1 (2022): 111–31

⁹ The Maritime Executive. "Maritime Security: The Concept of Innocent Passage." Accessed May 19, 2023. <https://maritime-executive.com/features/Maritime-Security-Private-The-Concept-of-Innocent-Passage>.

¹⁰ Hebbbar, Anish. "Innocent Passage under UNCLOS: An Exploration of the Tenets, Trials, and Tribulations." In *Maritime Law in Motion*, 227–56. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020.

¹¹ Hakapää, Kari. "Innocent passage – past and present." *Jussens venner* 33, no. 6 (1998): 333–54.

waterways between two separate governments' exclusive economic zones (EEZs) or high seas, or between the territorial sea of a coastal state and the high seas. Some well-known examples include the Panama Canal, the Strait of Malacca, and the Strait of Hormuz. According to the principle of transit passage, vessels and aircraft have the legal right to move freely and quickly through certain international waterways without unreasonable obstruction. This means that the coastal state whose waters the strait runs through has no right to prevent or hinder the passage of ships and planes, with the exception of reasonable limitations pertaining to safety, security, and the conservation of the maritime environment.¹²

Even in the midst of armed war or interstate tensions, transit passage privileges are not suspended. To exert influence or demonstrate sovereignty over the strait, coastal states cannot unilaterally halt or restrict transit passage. This ensures the smooth operation of international maritime trade and safeguards the freedom of navigation at sea. Coastal states have the right to implement rules and policies pertaining to navigation safety, marine environment conservation, and traffic management within the strait even if they cannot block transit passage. These regulations should be reasonable and should not discriminate against ships or aircraft of any particular nationality. They should also be consistent with international law, including UNCLOS.¹³ Transit passage also extends to submarines and aircraft carriers passing through international straits. However, these vessels are subject to specific provisions in UNCLOS that require them to operate on the surface and display their flag, ensuring transparency and avoiding ambiguity regarding their presence in the strait.

Archipelagic sea lanes passage:

Passage via archipelagic sea lanes is governed by a set of rules that determine who can sail or fly across these waters. This description fits the category of states known as "archipelagic states," which are made up of several islands. Internal waters of an archipelagic state consist of the sea surrounding the archipelago and the waters encircled by its furthest islands. The archipelagic state enjoys complete authority and jurisdiction over these waterways because they are an integral component of its territory. The authority to sail through authorized sea lanes within archipelagic waters is granted to foreign ships and aircraft. These shipping channels are designated so that international ships can use them without interruption from the archipelagic state for legitimate purposes.¹⁴ The passage of archipelagic sea lanes cannot be suspended or blocked by the archipelagic state, equivalent to the notion of innocent passage in territorial seas. This is a permanent entitlement that does not terminate in the event of war or international tensions.

The rules governing transit via archipelagic maritime lanes should not favor or disadvantage any one nation's ships or aircraft. The right of transit across the specified maritime lanes is extended to all foreign vessels and aircraft, regardless of their country of origin. However, archipelagic nations are allowed to set legislation and take actions within the sea lanes to ensure the security of routing, control traffic, and safeguard the surroundings. However, these guidelines must be fair and should not hinder the right of transit. When passing through the territorial waters of an archipelagic state, foreign ships are issue to the jurisdiction and

¹² Caminos, Hugo, and Vincent P. Cogliati-Bantz. "Transit Passage Defined." In *The Legal Regime of Straits*, 206–24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

¹³ Malhotra, Ankit. "Understanding Innocent and Transit Passage." *jtms*, June 5, 2020.

<https://www.journalofterritorialandmaritimestudies.net/post/2020/06/05/understanding-innocent-and-transit-passage>.

¹⁴ Lestari, Maria Maya. "What Is the Right, Archipelagic Sea Lanes and Passage? (According to Unclos 1982 and Practice)." *Indonesian Journal of International Law* 18, no. 2 (2021).

regulations of that state. All necessary reporting, notification, and operational processes must be followed, as well as all applicable safety and environmental regulations.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ):

The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of a coastal state stretches out to a maximum of 200 nautical miles (about 370 kilometers). Within this area, the coastal state has exclusive control over the use of the sea, the seafloor, and the subsoil for the extraction of natural resources. The coastal state has exclusive jurisdiction over all EEZ resources. The natural assets such as fish, oil, gas, minerals, and renewable energy sources located within the zone may be explored, exploited, conserved, and managed under this jurisdiction. In addition to protecting and preserving the maritime environment, the coastal state is responsible for establishing and regulating marine scientific research.¹⁵ Other states have freedoms and rights within the EEZ, despite the coastal state's exclusive rights to the resources within its EEZ. Navigational freedom, aerial flight, the ability to install pipes and cables under the water, and the ability to undertake scientific research are all examples. However, these actions cannot violate the coastal state's sovereign rights and must be carried out in conformity with its laws and regulations. Exclusive control over the continental shelf rests with the coastal state located inside its EEZ because it is an underwater extension of its landmass. The coastal state has sole jurisdiction over the continental shelf and its non-living resources, such as oil, gas, minerals, and other raw materials. When it comes to the management and usage of the resources in their EEZs, coastal states are strongly urged to work together with other states, especially in circumstances where the resources are shared or straddle neighboring zones.¹⁶ In addition, UNCLOS stresses the importance of coastal governments considering sustainable development and maritime environment conservation in their EEZ endeavors.

Liberty of High Sea:

The open seas are the areas of international waters beyond the jurisdiction of any single nation. They are not the exclusive property of any one nation, but rather are considered international waterways shared by all nations. Huge swaths of ocean outside the territorial waters, archipelagic waterways, and coastlines' exclusive economic zones make up what are known as the high seas.¹⁷ All nations' ships should be allowed unfettered access to the high seas, free from intervention from landlocked states. The right to innocent passage, the ability to travel through international waterways, and the capability to engage in military, academic, and commercial pursuits are all included in this liberty. Aircraft have the same unfettered liberty to fly across international waters. High seas provide an area for unfettered overflight, but coastal states have limited control over the airspace above their territorial waters.¹⁸ All nations have equal access to fish in the high seas. Overfishing can be avoided and marine resources protected thanks to conservation efforts and regulations. For the purposes of communication, energy transmission, and other similar operations, states have the right to install underwater cables and pipelines on the high seas. The high seas are open for scientific exploration and inquiry by all nations.

¹⁵ Rahman, Md Mostafijur. "Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)." In *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies*, 1–7. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

¹⁶ Van Tran, Thuy. *Freedom of Navigation in the Exclusive Economic Zone: An EU Approach*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.

¹⁷ Van Su, Nguyen. "International Waters and the Freedom of the High Seas - National Defence Journal." *Tapchiquptd.vn*, 2018. <http://tapchiquptd.vn/en/research-and-discussion/international-waters-and-the-freedom-of-the-high-seas/11252.html>.

¹⁸ Khoei, Peyman Hakimzade, and Mohsen Abdollahi. "Limitations of Freedom of Navigation on the High Seas." *Specialty Journal of Politics and Law* 1, no. 1 (2016): 60–66.

Freedom of navigation as strategic tool

The concept of freedom of navigation is a fundamental principle in international law, aimed at ensuring unimpeded maritime access for all nations. However, in the situation of the SCS, both China and the United States have been accused of instrumentalizing freedom of navigation as a strategic tool rather than upholding it as a legal principle. An interview has been conducted in which Lt. Cdr. Adnan Mir PN quoted that “both U.S and China do not accept international law of sea, so they have their own perceptions about freedom of navigation and both are trying to implement their own powers for the sake of navigational freedom to create their dominance in the region. Rules or laws are basically made for small and weak states to follow and great powers are the creator of those laws to create their dominance in the world.”

China's Instrumentalization of Freedom of Navigation:

China has been assertive in its territorial claims in the South China Sea, asserting sovereignty over disputed islands and reefs. Despite 2016 international arbitration rulings, an international tribunal, constituted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), ruled against China's claims in a case brought by the Philippines, China has continued to build artificial islands and deploy military assets in the region.¹⁹ By utilizing freedom of navigation rhetoric, China seeks to justify its actions and legitimize its control over disputed areas, portraying them as within its sovereign territory. China has also been accused of imposing excessive restrictions on FON in the disputed waters. It has established controversial territorial baselines, requiring foreign vessels to seek permission before entering designated areas. Such actions of China are portraying the clear image that China is using freedom of navigation law to influence the Asia-Pacific region and exercise its power in order to alter the world order.

US Utilization of Freedom of Navigation:

The United States has frequently conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, challenging China's excessive maritime claims. Through these operations, the US aims to demonstrate that it does not recognize Chinese territorial assertions and uphold the principles of freedom of navigation. However, these actions are also driven by strategic considerations, as the America seeks to uphold its military existence and influence in the area. In 2019, the US Navy conducted a FONOP near the contested Scarborough Shoal, challenging China's restrictions on freedom of navigation.²⁰ While the operation aimed to uphold international norms, it also served to assert the US presence in the region and signal its commitment to its allies. The US employs freedom of navigation as a strategic tool to signal its commitment to regional security and deter potential adversaries. The US regularly conducts combined military trainings with allies and partners in the disputed sea, highlighting its assurance to FON and deterring any attempts to restrict maritime access.²¹ These exercises serve as strategic tools to uphold regional solidity and counterbalance Chinese growing influence.

Creation of Security Alliances to counter China:

In recent years, the rise of China as a global power has prompted the creation of security alliances aimed at countering its influence and addressing regional security challenges. These

¹⁹ Uscg.gov. “South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What’s next?” Accessed May 22, 2023. <https://www.uscc.gov/research/south-china-sea-arbitration-ruling-what-happened-and-whats-next>.

²⁰ Panda, Ankit. “South China Sea: US Destroyer Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations near Scarborough Shoal.” Thediplomat.com. Accessed May 22, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/south-china-sea-us-destroyer-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operations-near-scarborough-shoal/>.

²¹ Fravel, M. Taylor, and Charles L. Glaser. “How Much Risk Should the United States Run in the South China Sea?” *International Security* 47, no. 2 (2022): 88–134.

alliances have emerged as a reply to Chinese assertive behavior in various strategic areas, including the SCS and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Motivated by concerns over China's expanding military capabilities, territorial disputes, and its impact on the existing rules-based international order, countries have sought to form collective security arrangements to preserve regional stability, protect shared interests, and uphold international norms and principles. The creation of these security alliances reflects a shift in the geopolitical landscape and underscores the growing importance of collaboration and collective action in managing the challenges posed by China's rise.

Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreements (EDCAs):

Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreements (EDCAs), signed in 2014, are agreements between the United States and Philippines that aim to enhance defense cooperation, increase military interoperability, and strengthen the capabilities of the partner country's armed forces. The agreement allows a greater revolving presence of American forces in the Philippines and facilitates joint training, exercises, and infrastructure improvements.²² The EDCA enables the Philippines to enhance its naval sphere consciousness, develop its defense capabilities, and strengthen its deterrence against potential threats in the South China Sea. Basa Air Base, located in Pampanga province, Philippines, is one of the agreed-upon locations for rotational presence and activities under the EDCA. It provides strategic proximity to the SCS and serves as a hub for joint training, exercises, and logistical support. Antonio Bautista Air Base, located in Palawan province, Philippines, is another designated location for potential activities under the EDCA.²³ The base is strategically positioned in close proximity to the disputed waters of the South China Sea, making it suitable for maritime security cooperation and surveillance operations. Under the agreement between the two countries, which entered into force on February 1st, 2023, the United States revealed plans to expand new military sites in the Philippines. Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan, Balabac Island in Palawan, Naval Base Camilo Osias in Santa Ana, Cagayan, and Camp Melchor Dela Cruz in Gamu, Isabela are the four new locations.²⁴

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad):

The United States, Japan, Australia, and India form the "Quad," which is crucial in balancing China's aggression in the South China Sea. Since its inception in 2007, representatives from the four member countries have convened on a regular basis to discuss issues of mutual concern. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan projected the establishment of Quad in 2007.²⁵ The struggle in the disputed sea is one of many regional security challenges discussed and addressed during the Quad. Each nation is dedicated to maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific area and is concerned about China's maritime claims and aggressive conduct. To strengthen maritime security and advance a free and open Asia-Pacific, the Quad participates in cooperative military exercises, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building programs.²⁶ These steps show that the international community is united in its opposition to Chinese expansionist actions in the territorial sea and serve as a deterrent. The Quad's primary goal is to protect free trade, unrestricted shipping lanes, and the safety of international air travel. Members of the

²² U.S. Embassy Manila. "Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) Fact Sheet." U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, March 20, 2023.

²³ Acosta, Rene. "U.S. Begins Air Base Rehab in Philippines as Part of Basing Agreement." USNI News, March 20, 2023.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense. "Philippines, U.S. Announce Four New EDCA Sites," February 2023.

²⁵ Buchan, Patrick Gerard, and Benjamin Rimland. "Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue." Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022.

²⁶ Fas.org. "The 'Quad': Security Cooperation among the United States," 2022.

Quad met in 2022 and made a pact to uphold a rules-based maritime system everywhere from the East to the South China Seas while also strongly opposing any forceful, provocative, or unilateral efforts to alter the current order.

AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States):

In September 2021, politicians from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the formation of a strengthened trilateral security collaboration known as "AUKUS." The purpose of AUKUS is to fortify the bilateral relationship between the two countries so that one may better support the other's security and defense objectives. The partners' dedication to maintaining peace and order in the Asia-Pacific is reaffirmed by AUKUS. The alliance's concentration on cutting-edge technologies, including as nuclear-powered submarines, is intended to strengthen defense and security cooperation.²⁷ By enhancing the military capabilities and deterrent efforts of its member countries, AUKUS contributes to regional security dynamics. Australia's capacity to track and react to developments in the Asia-Pacific, especially the South China Sea, is bolstered by the partnership's provision of cutting-edge assets that can be deployed there. With this declaration, a trilateral consultation period of 18 months and two related streams of effort got underway. Purchasing nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy is the initial AUKUS program.²⁸ Focusing on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and new subsea capabilities, the second program aims to improve joint capabilities and interoperability. On March 13, 2023, AUKUS partners announced the best plan to speed up the development of Australia's nuclear-powered submarine capacity without compromising on non-proliferation safeguards.²⁹

Maximization of power and security

Offensive realist posits that states are driven by the pursuit of power and security.³⁰ According to this perspective, major powers exercise freedom of navigation in the South China Sea to maximize their power and security. In an interview, Captain Ghulam Akbar, ex-naval Attaché China, in an interview said that "US is using Freedom of navigation to create its hegemony in the disputed region. For this purpose, US has created alliances with Australia, Germany, France, Japan, and Canada. AUKUS and Quad. These alliances represent US keen interest in this region, US has created these alliances to maximize its power and security collectively in the region. Now US do not enter into any region alone but it uses its alliances and partners to keep its presence in particular region." By demonstrating strong naval presence and conducting joint freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), major powers assert their influence and assert their role as regional security guarantors.

Offensive realists argue that major powers exercise freedom of navigation to secure their economic interests. The South China Sea is a crucial maritime trade route with vast reserves of natural resources. Ensuring unimpeded access to these resources and maintaining stable trade routes is vital for major powers' economic well-being and power projection capabilities. Japan, a major power with significant economic interests in the region, regularly sends its naval ships

²⁷ Gering, Tuvia. "Why China Is Genuinely Worried about AUKUS." The China Project, November 29, 2021.

²⁸ Pant, Harsh V. "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific: Stakeholders Weigh Their Wins and Losses." Observational Research Foundation, December 10, 2021.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Defense. "AUKUS: The Trilateral Security Partnership between Australia, U.K. and U.S.," 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/AUKUS/>.

³⁰ Johnson, Dominic D. P., and Bradley A. Thayer. "Survival under Anarchy from the Pleistocene to the Present." *Politics and the Life Sciences: The Journal of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences* 35, no. 1 (2016): 1–26.

through the SCS to guard its energy and trade routes. By exercising freedom of navigation, Japan safeguards its economic interests and maintains its power in the global economy.³¹ Major powers exercise FON in the South China Sea to strengthen their alliances and deter potential adversaries. Offensive realists argue that states engage in strategic partnerships and alliances to maximize their power and security.³² Through joint exercises and FONOPs, major powers reassure their allies, deter aggression, and signal a united front against potential threats. The United States conducts joint freedom of navigation exercises with allies such as Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom. These actions serve to strengthen alliance relationships, deter potential aggression, and send a clear message that any disruption to freedom of navigation will be met with a unified response.

Stability of Global order

The SCS has become a focal point for global stability due to its strategic significance. The emergence of China, as influential power in the region, create concerns for the permanency of current international order. The United States, in collaboration with its allies, has played a crucial role in maintaining the permanency of the world order in the region. The America, as a global superpower, has cultivated alliances and partnerships in the South China Sea to deter potential aggression and maintain a balance of power.³³ By strengthening its ties with regional allies, the US bolsters their military capabilities and reinforces a collective defense posture. This deterrent effect helps stabilize the global order by dissuading any tries a change in course from the current situation. The US-Japan alliance is a cornerstone of stability in the South China Sea. Through joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and defense cooperation, the alliance enhances deterrence and counterbalances China's assertive actions.³⁴

The US, along with its partners, strives to uphold the rules-based international order in the South China Sea. This order guarantees liberty of navigating, compliance with international law, and amicable conflict resolution. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), comprising the US, Japan, Australia, and India, serves as a mechanism for fostering security cooperation and upholding the rules-based order. This partnership promotes independence of navigating, maritime security, and admiration for universal rules in the conflicted sea, contributing to global stability.³⁵ The US and Australia have actively participated in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in the South China Sea. For instance, after the devastating Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, the US-led Operation Damayan provided vital aid and assistance, demonstrating the stability-enhancing role of US alliances in the region.³⁶

The US, through its alliances, exerts normative power and engages in diplomatic efforts to promote stability in the South China Sea that automatically result in the stability of global order. By advocating for peaceful resolutions and facilitating dialogue among stakeholders, the US helps mitigate tensions and foster cooperative solutions to disputes. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a vital part in regional balance. The US has engaged with

³¹ Guoxing, Ji. "Center Occasional Paper - SLOC Security in the Asia Pacific." Dkiapcss.edu, 2000.

³² Wall, Colin, and Rachel Ellehuus. "Leveraging Allies and Partners." Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022.

³³ Poling, Gregory B. "The United States Is Deeply Invested in the South China Sea." Foreign Policy, August 14, 2022.

³⁴ Berkofsky, Axel. "The US-Japan Security Alliance – Ready and Equipped to Deal with China?" *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2022.

³⁵ Plaster, Graham. "The Quad: A Mature Counterbalance in the South China Sea." *FAOA Journal of International Affairs*, December 16, 2022.

³⁶ Gong, Lina. "HADR as a Diplomatic Tool in Southeast Asia-China Relations amid Changing Security Dynamics." Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, December 3, 2021.

ASEAN countries through initiatives such as the ASEAN-U.S. Maritime Exercise, aimed at enhancing maritime security and promoting a rules-based order.³⁷ These diplomatic endeavors reinforce stability by encouraging cooperation and peaceful interactions.

China as common security threat

Emergence of China as a great power in the Asia-Pacific region has led to growing concerns among the members of AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. China's actions and policies are perceived as a common security threat by these alliances. China's rapid military modernization, including the development of advanced weapons systems and expanding its naval capabilities, has raised alarm bells for AUKUS and Quad. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, such as the construction of military bases on artificial islands, have increased tensions and undermined regional stability.³⁸ China's construction of military facilities on reclaimed islands in the SCS, including the positioning of missile systems and warrior aircraft, poses a direct military threat to the interests of AUKUS and Quad members. These actions challenge the existing balance of power and could potentially escalate regional conflicts.

China's increasing economic influence and diplomatic assertiveness have been viewed as tools to expand its regional dominance and undermine the interests of AUKUS and Quad members. China's use of economic leverage, such as through trade sanctions and investment pressures, to influence the political decisions of neighboring countries raises concerns about its intentions and its ability to coerce smaller nations. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to strengthen economic connectivity and infrastructure development in the conflicted region.³⁹ By investing in strategic infrastructure projects, Beijing seeks to exert influence, enhance its soft power, and create dependencies among regional nations, thereby challenging the influence and security architecture established by the US and its allies. The challenges posed by China's behavior, including maritime assertiveness, economic interests, regional influence, and violation of international norms, have prompted increased cooperation and collective efforts among the US and its allies addressing the common security problems*. Recognizing and effectively responding to China's actions in the South China Sea is crucial for safeguarding regional stability and upholding the rules-based international order in the face of this common security threat.

Balancing China's expanding regional impact

In order to thrive in the international framework, offensive realism postulates that governments want to increase their strength and security. As a result, the US has been pursuing a plan to counterbalance China's expanding influence in the area. As part of its plan to counterbalance China's expanding influence, the US has established and expanded military ties and security partnerships throughout the region. These alliances provide a network of support and cooperation among like-minded nations, serving as a deterrent against potential aggression and expanding China's sphere of influence. The US-Japan Security Treaty, which dates back to 1960, is a crucial alliance that bolsters security in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁰ This alliance serves as a deterrent against any potential threat from China and contributes to balancing its influence in the region.

³⁷ The White House. "ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." The White House, November 12, 2022.

³⁸ Grossman, Derek. "Why China Should Worry about Asia's Reaction to AUKUS." Foreign Policy, April 12, 2023.

³⁹ McBride, James. "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative." Council on Foreign Relations, February 21, 2019.

⁴⁰ Maizland, Lindsay. "The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance." Council on Foreign Relations, September 20, 2013.

The US maintains a significant military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, which acts as a balancing mechanism against China's growing power. The US maintains military bases in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, which serve as strategic locations for the projection of military supremacy in the Asia-Pacific.⁴¹ These bases allow for rapid response capabilities, deterrence against aggression, and contribute to balancing China's military expansion in the region. The US employs economic tools to balance China's influence by fostering and strengthening economic relationships with regional partners. By promoting free trade agreements and economic integration, the US seeks to create economic interdependencies that mitigate China's leverage and provide alternatives for countries in the region. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral trade contract involving several states in the Asia-Pacific region, was viewed as a strategic tool to counterbalance Chinese economic dominance. Although the US withdrew from the agreement in 2017, it demonstrated the US's intention to create a regional economic framework that could counter China's growing influence.⁴²

Regional members are promoting economic integration to reduce their dependence on China and create alternative economic opportunities. By diversifying their economic partnerships, countries aim to mitigate the leverage that China holds and reduce the potential for economic coercion. The “Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership” (CPTPP) is a regional trade agreement that includes countries such as Japan, Australia, and Vietnam. The CPTPP aims to strengthen economic ties among member countries, delivers substitutions to Chinese economic dominance, and promote economic stability in the region.⁴³ Countries are balancing China's infrastructure development initiatives in the region by attracting investments and offering alternative development projects. This helps to counter China's influence and prevents a scenario where countries become overly dependent on China's economic and strategic interests. Japan has launched the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI), which aims to provide high-quality and transparent infrastructure development in the region.⁴⁴ The PQI offers an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on quality, sustainability, and local ownership.

Destabilization of Western security order

The idea of ‘freedom of navigation’ is fundamental to the Western security order, which was significantly shaped by the US through coalitions like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the cooperation between Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS). However, disputes brought on by the use of freedom of navigation in contested domains, especially in the South China Sea, have the possibility to undermine the current security system. In an interview Lt. Cdr. Adnan Mir PN stated that “there are two countries India and Australia that can confront with China. Japan on the other side alone is not in the condition to do so, but with the assistance of U.S, Japan also poses tensions for China. China signed the Solomon Islands deals that would focuses on boosting its national security capacity. These Islands located in southern pacific near Australia. These Chinese steps would destabilize the stability of the

⁴¹ Kim, Claudia Junghyun. “Introduction: U.S. Military Base Towns in Korea and Japan.” In *Base Towns*, 1–27. London, England: Oxford University Press New York, 2023.

⁴² Asia Regional Integration Center. “Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Free Trade Agreement.” Adb.org. Accessed May 22, 2023. [https://aric.adb.org/fta/trans-pacific-partnership-\(tpi\)](https://aric.adb.org/fta/trans-pacific-partnership-(tpi)).

⁴³ Wu, Terry, and Doren Chadee. “Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP): Implications for the Asia-Pacific Region.” In *Advances in Theory and Practice of Emerging Markets*, 53–74. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022.

⁴⁴ Katada, Saori N. “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure: Developmentalism or New Liberal Order?” Ubc.ca. Accessed May 22, 2023. https://sppga.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/07/Katada_revised-UBC-Partnership-for-Quality-Infrastructure.pdf.

Western security order. India joined Quad recently; the creation of AUKUS would also destabilize the region. India is also playing its part through Andaman Islands that are located near Strait of Malacca, which is another important choke point for sea lane of communication. U.S. being world hegemonic power is making its presence through its partners that includes India, Australia, Canada, UK and Japan. It also created alliances like AUKUS and QUAD to control the region and destabilize the environment for China to create its influence and from becoming dominant threat for U.S. Now U.S. is shifting its Nuclear Submarine technology from India to Australia because India does not have such islands where US can plant that technology, U.S. purpose is to navigate through Australia in the region and limit the Chinese activities in the region, so this shift of technology would further destabilize the region.”

The integrity of the Western security system may be threatened by ongoing disputes over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which may lead to a military buildup and arms race in the region. A cycle of militarization that worsens tensions may result when nations feel obligated to increase their military power in response to plausible threats. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, including the construction of military bases and the deployment of advanced weaponry, have prompted neighboring countries to bolster their defense capabilities. This regional military buildup raises concerns about an arms race and potential security dilemmas, challenging the stability of the Western security order.⁴⁵

Freedom of navigation conflicts can also generate divisions within the Western security order. Differences in strategic priorities, risk assessments, and approaches to managing disputes can create fractures among QUAD and AUKUS members, weakening the collective strength and coherence of the Western security architecture.⁴⁶ While the US has been more proactive in conducting freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, some other QUAD and AUKUS members may adopt a more cautious approach, emphasizing diplomacy and cooperation to avoid exacerbating tensions. These differing perspectives on the best course of action can strain unity within the Western security order.

Shift in Security Paradigm

The concept of FON in the disputed sea has the potential to bring about an important shift in the security paradigm of the Asia-Pacific region. As major powers, such as the United States, China, and regional stakeholders, engage in disputes over territorial claims and exercise their rights to navigate through these waters, the balance of power and security dynamics in the region can be fundamentally altered. Freedom of navigation disputes have the potential to redefine security priorities for countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Traditional security concerns, such as military threats and territorial integrity, may become intertwined with issues of maritime access and control. This shift broadens the scope of security considerations, requiring nations to reassess their strategic priorities. The Philippines, a claimant nation in the disputed waters, has witnessed a redefinition of its security priorities due to freedom of navigation concerns. It has sought to stabilize its alliance with the US, which emphasizes military cooperation, with the need to maintain economic ties with China, highlighting the evolving nature of security considerations in the region.⁴⁷

Freedom of navigation disputes in the South China Sea can foster the emergence of middle powers and coalitions as key players in the regional security landscape. These middle powers, seeking to protect their own interests and maintain a rules-based international order, may

⁴⁵ Global Challenges. “Global Challenges - South China Sea: War on the Horizon?” January 18, 2017.

⁴⁶ “China, AUKUS Countries Clash at IAEA over Nuclear Submarine Plan.” *Reuters*. September 16, 2022.

⁴⁷ Poling, Gregory B. “The Transformation of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 7, 2023.

band together to counterbalance the influence of major powers and uphold freedom of navigation.⁴⁸ The Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, has been revitalized in recent years, with a emphasis on oceanic security and autonomy of navigation. This coalition seeks to counterbalance China's assertiveness in the region and promote a rules-based order, indicating the rise of middle powers in shaping the security paradigm.

Freedom of navigation concerns in the SCS can foster enhanced regional cooperation among countries with shared security interests. By working together to safeguard freedom of navigation, nations can strengthen multilateral frameworks, promote dialogue, and forge common strategies to address security challenges in the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been instrumental in facilitating dialogue and cooperation among member states regarding freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Code of Conduct negotiations, ASEAN nations aim to maintain stability, ensure the peaceful resolution of disputes, and promote regional security.⁴⁹

Freedom of navigation disputes can lead to a reassessment of defense postures and alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. Countries may seek to bolster their military capabilities, forge new security partnerships, and adjust their alignment strategies to counterbalance perceived threats to FON and territorial integrity. In response to the SCS disputes, Vietnam has pursued a more active defense posture and expanded its defense cooperation with countries such as Japan and India. This shift reflects Vietnam's efforts to strengthen its security alliances and enhance its military capabilities to safeguard its interests and freedom of navigation.⁵⁰

The conflicting territorial claims, militarization of islands, and assertive behavior displayed by various actors have heightened tensions and jeopardized the established norms of maritime security. The destabilizing effect of this confrontation extends beyond the immediate region, reverberating throughout the Western security order. The South China Sea's significance as a vital shipping route and its potential for resource exploitation make it a matter of international interest. The actions taken by states involved, including the deployment of military assets, increased surveillance activities, and the creation of artificial islands, have raised concerns about the erosion of the rules-based order. The Western security order, built upon principles of international laws, the right to routing, and amicable conflict resolution, is facing a critical challenge. The confrontations in the conflicted sea undermine the trust and cooperation amongst nations, while also hindering the collective efforts to address shared global challenges. The potential for miscalculation or accidental escalation in this volatile region is a constant source of concern for the international community. It is imperative for all stakeholders to engage in meaningful dialogue, promote confidence-building measures, and uphold the principles of international law to prevent further destabilization of the Western security order. Constructive diplomatic negotiations, multilateral cooperation, and respect for the rights of all nations to navigate freely in international waters are crucial for preserving security and prosperity in the SCS and beyond.

Conclusion

The subject of "Freedom of Navigation" and its relationship to the South China Sea conflict has significant attention. As nations compete for control over the disputed waters, tensions have escalated, leading to concerns about potential conflicts and the stability of the region. Conflict

⁴⁸ Singh, Udai Bhanu. "Major Powers and the Security of Southeast Asia." *Strategic Analysis* 24, no. 2 (2000): 315–42.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Vu, Minh Phuong. "Vietnam Seeks Safer Maritime Security Partnerships." *East Asia Forum*, May 5, 2023.

in the South China Sea centers on territorial disputes between a number of nations, notably China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan. These nations assert their sovereignty over various islands, reefs, and maritime zones within the region, leading to overlapping claims and disputes. At the center of this conflict is China's assertive behavior, as it has been actively building and militarizing artificial islands, challenging the existing status quo and international law.

One of the fundamental principles at stake in this conflict is the concept of freedom of navigation. The South China Sea is a vital maritime artery through which trillions of dollars' worth of trade passes each year. Therefore, any disruption or infringement of freedom of navigation in this area can have severe consequences for global trade and regional stability. There are significant ramifications for regional and international security in Asia from the ongoing territorial conflicts in the South China Sea. This particular problem might be considered as a crucial test case that would reveal Beijing's potential capabilities and desire to change the regional status quo in the face of geopolitical competition between the still dominant US forces and China's fast-modernizing military. As the US faces critical opportunities to demonstrate its supreme endurance and its defense and diplomatic ability in safeguarding its allies and friends while managing its rivalry with a rising China, how America handles this so-called Asian problem is turning into an assessment for the future status of US primacy. Thus, competition between China and the US may not be able to be avoided, especially considering that both countries are constantly seeking to advance their respective geostrategic dominance and national interests.

On the one hand, China's actions in the South China Sea have raised concerns among neighboring nations and the international community regarding the possible erosion of FON. Its construction of military facilities on artificial islands, imposition of fishing restrictions, harassment of foreign vessels, and declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) have all contributed to this apprehension. These actions not only directly challenge the rights of other countries but also create a chilling effect, deterring other nations from exercising their freedom of navigation in fear of confrontations with China. On the other hand, the United States, as a major stakeholder in the region, has been dynamically involved in upholding FON in the South China Sea. Through its "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (FONOPs), the U.S. Navy conducts regular patrols to uphold the notion of liberty of passage and contest excessive maritime claims. These operations have drawn criticism from China, which views them as provocations, but they serve as an essential mechanism to reinforce the status of unimpeded navigation in the region. The SCS conflict and the issue of freedom of navigation have significant implications for the growth of the regional economy, safety, and peace. The potential for miscalculation and escalation of tensions is a real concern, as any confrontation in the disputed waters could quickly spiral into a wider conflict. Moreover, disruptions to maritime trade routes in the South China Sea would have far-reaching consequences for global commerce, affecting not only the littoral states but also the broader international community. International law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), provides a framework for resolving disputes and ensuring freedom of navigation. It is imperative that all nations involved in the South China Sea conflict adhere to the principles outlined in UNCLOS and seek peaceful avenues to settle their differences. The use of international arbitration and legal mechanisms can contribute to a rule-based system and provide a fair and impartial resolution to the disputes. The United States and China have different interpretations and approaches to the concept of freedom of navigation. These differing perspectives stem from their respective geopolitical interests, historical experiences,

and strategic priorities in the Asia Pacific region. The US has long advocated for and prioritized the principle of FON as a fundamental tenet of international law.

From the U.S. perspective, freedom of navigation entails the unimpeded movement of planes and ships transiting foreign waterways and airspace in accordance with established lawful agendas, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The U.S. views this principle as essential for maintaining open and secure global trade routes, preserving the stability of maritime commons, and upholding the rights of all nations to access and utilize international waters. In contrast, China's approach to freedom of navigation has been subject to scrutiny and differing interpretations. While China officially supports freedom of navigation in principle, its actions and policies in the South China Sea have raised concerns among other nations and the international community. China's construction and militarization of artificial islands, assertion of territorial claims inconsistent with international law, and imposition of fishing restrictions in disputed waters have been perceived by some as attempts to limit freedom of navigation and assert control over strategic areas. China argues that its actions in the South China Sea are aimed at safeguarding its sovereignty and security interests. It asserts historical claims over the majority of the disputed waters based on the "nine-dash line" concept, which has been widely disputed by neighboring countries and dismissed by an international arbitration tribunal. China's perspective on freedom of navigation is influenced by its desire to protect what it sees as its legitimate rights and interests, including control over its claimed territories and the prevention of external interference in regional affairs. The differing interpretations of freedom of navigation between the United States and China have led to tensions and disagreements, mainly in the SCS. The United States conducts regular "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (FONOPs) to challenge what it perceives as China's excessive maritime claims and to assert the rights of all states to spontaneously navigate through international waters. China, in turn, has criticized these operations as provocative and a violation of its sovereignty.

From an offensive realism perspective, the FON conflict in the South China Sea can be understood as a manifestation of great power competition and the pursuit of strategic dominance in the Asia Pacific region. Offensive realism, as a theory of international relations, posits that states are driven by the desire for power and security in an anarchic international system. In this context, the South China Sea conflict reflects the competition between the United States and China for regional influence and control. Both countries perceive the strategic importance of the disputed Sea due to its rich natural resources, vigorous shipping ways, and geopolitical significance. Offensive realists argue that states, driven by their desire for power, seek to expand their influence and secure strategic advantages to enhance their own security. From an offensive realist perspective, China seeks to protect its national interests, secure vital resources, and deter potential challenges to its rise as a global power. On the other hand, the United States perceives China's actions as a threat to its own strategic interests and regional influence. The United States, as a major power, aims to maintain its position of dominance in the Asia Pacific and prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon that could challenge its supremacy. Therefore, the United States employs measures such as Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to counter China's attempts at establishing de facto control over the South China Sea.

China's declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in 2013 and its increased naval presence and patrols in the South China Sea have also contributed to concerns about its intentions and its impact on freedom of navigation. It is perceived that these actions are part of China's broader strategic objective to establish dominance and control over

the region, thereby limiting the influence and presence of other major powers, including the US. While it is accurate to say that both China and the United States have strategic reasons to be interested in the Asia-Pacific, it is crucial to understand that their views on freedom of navigation are different. The United States views its activities as a method of upholding the current system of rules-based governance and preventing any one nation from dominating the region, while China's moves have been interpreted by some as attempts to impose control and build supremacy. However, it is crucial to avoid oversimplifying the issue and to consider the complex geopolitical dynamics and the historical context in which these actions are taking place.

It is important to understand that the United States has had a longstanding presence and security commitment in the Asia Pacific. This commitment stems from its desire to protect its interests, promote regional stability, and uphold the principles of a rules-based order. The creation of alliances serves as a means to enhance cooperation and coordination with like-minded countries in the region. AUKUS, for example, is a recent alliance formed between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It focuses on strengthening cooperation in areas such as defense, technology, and intelligence sharing. The aim of AUKUS is to address emerging security challenges, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, and to promote interoperability among the member states' defense forces. From the US perspective, AUKUS reinforces its commitment to regional security and helps counterbalance China's growing influence in the region. The Quad, comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, is another alliance that has gained prominence in recent years. The Quad seeks to address common security challenges and promote an unrestricted, accessible, and welcoming Asia-Pacific. The alliance focuses on areas such as maritime security, counterterrorism, connectivity, and humanitarian assistance. The US perceives the Quad as an apparatus to strengthen its regional partnerships, project influence, and ensure a balance of power in the face of China's increasing assertiveness. Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreements (EDCAs) are bilateral agreements between the United States and individual countries in the region, such as the Philippines and Singapore. These agreements facilitate closer defense cooperation, including joint exercises, access to military facilities, and capacity building. EDCAs provide a framework for the United States to maintain a security presence and strengthen its partnerships in the region.

The confrontation in the South China Sea challenges these principles and undermines the stability of the broader security architecture. The confrontation in the South China Sea erodes trust and cooperation among the nations involved. It creates a climate of suspicion and heightens tensions, making it increasingly challenging to build consensus and pursue diplomatic solutions. The Western security order relies on cooperation and dialogue to address security challenges, but the confrontational approach in the SCS hampers such efforts, undermining the stability and effectiveness of the order. The heightened tensions in the South China Sea increase the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. Any minor incident or misinterpretation of intentions could potentially spiral into a broader conflict with significant implications for regional stability. The Western security order aims to prevent conflicts and maintain stability through mechanisms such as dispute resolution and confidence-building measures. The confrontational approach in the South China Sea undermines these mechanisms, increasing the risk of unintended consequences.

The SCS dispute has allegations for regional alliances and partnerships in the Western security order. The United States, as a major stakeholder, has been actively engaged in upholding FON and supporting its regional allies and associates. The confrontational nature of the dispute can

strain alliances and partnerships, as different nations have varied interests and perspectives on how to address the issue. This could weaken the cohesion and effectiveness of the Western security order in the Asia Pacific region. The South China Sea is a vital maritime trade route, with a significant portion of global trade passing through its waters. Disruptions to freedom of navigation in the region can have far-reaching implications for global trade and economic stability. The Western security order, with its emphasis on open access to international waters and protection of trade routes, is essential for ensuring the free flow of goods and maintaining economic prosperity. Any destabilization in the SCS has the potential to disrupt global supply chains and impact the economic stability of Western nations.

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