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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**US-China Rivalry in the South China Sea and Regional Security Dynamics****Aiman Batool**BS Graduate from Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages,
Islamabad.aimanbatool2604@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The South China Sea is now one of the key theaters of today's great power competition, where conflicting territorial claims, sea lanes of global commerce, and the military strategies of the United States and China converge in a small maritime area. In this article, which is an excerpt from a qualitative study of the competition from 2010 to 2024, attention will be paid to how Chinese island building and maritime assertiveness and American freedom of navigation exercises, alliance strengthening, and legal diplomacy are transforming Southeast Asian security order. It applies the logic of John Mearsheimer's offensive realism to both powers as security maximizers seeking to operate in an anarchic system and examines the implications of their competitive push for ASEAN unity, claimant state alignment and potential for accidental escalation. According to the article, the regional balance has changed due to militarisation, the erosion of multilateral dispute settlement and the coerced strategic review conducted by regional states and the likelihood of instability has increased. In the absence of continuous diplomacy and a common interpretation of the law of the sea, South China Sea will continue to be a long-lasting source of insecurity.

Keywords: South China Sea, United States, China, Offensive Realism, Regional Security, UNCLOS, ASEAN, Freedom of Navigation

Introduction

The South China Sea is the semi enclosed body of water between the Asian mainland and the Southeast Asian island chains that contains disputed sovereignty, concentrated natural resources, and is the site of a volume of seaborne trade that is commonly estimated at anywhere between three and five trillion dollars a year, and thus has become the focus point of a landmark geopolitical battle between the United States and the People's Republic of China. China's Nine Dash Line, an imaginary border that encompasses the majority of the sea, overlaps the EEZs and continental shelves of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei as well as, in neighboring sections of the sea, that of Indonesia, and Taiwan's historical claim more or less mirrors that of Beijing. The United States is not a territorial claimant but it has responded by challenging Chinese expansive maritime claims as inconsistent with international law and the freedom of navigation principles and has stationed patrolships, conducted military exercises and strengthened defence ties throughout the region (Alenezi, 2020).

It has intensified since China stepped up land reclamation and the construction of airstrips, radars and missile systems on features in the Spratly and Paracel groups and since the award by the arbitral tribunal established under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2016, which found that China's historic rights claim in the Nine Dash Line was null and void in so far as it transgressed its rights under UNCLOS. Beijing rejected the award, arguing that it was null and void, and it continued to consolidate in the physical world, while Washington played the award up to be a success for a rules-based order in the seas, even if it was unable to force

China to comply (Hayton, 2014). Along with this legal battle, China has a longer play of influence across the region through the Belt and Road, while the United States has tried to ensure a favourable military balance through the Free and Open Indo Pacific, the Quad, AUKUS and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Philippines.

Southeast Asian governments are in a particularly tough spot, as they depend on Chinese markets and investment, and on the United States for security reassurance and have created a situation of “hedging,” instead of a “regional alignment.” Militarisation increases the risk of an accidental collision between American and Chinese forces, a closure of shipping lanes would hurt global trade and energy supplies, and additional partners outside the region such as Japan, India, Australia, the United Kingdom and France have strengthened ties with Washington in order to prevent an imbalance from tipping too far (Koda, 2016). This article, therefore, considers the South China Sea not merely as a border dispute but as a great power tussle where economic, legal and strategic interests intersect. It goes through a literature review, a theoretical statement based on offensive realism, a statement of objectives and questions, a note on method, and three substantive discussions focused on reconstruction of the historical and legal context; interests of the two major rivals; and regional security dynamics, before concluding with findings that highlight diplomacy, legal restraint and multilateral management.

Literature Review

Since the economic and strategic importance of the South China Sea has increased, there has been a corresponding increase in studies of the region, with a first group of writing focusing on geography, resources and overlapping claims. The sea is the site of much of the global maritime trade, and is thought to contain significant fisheries and oil and gas reserves that are disputed by several countries in Southeast Asia, while China's Nine Dash Line runs through EEZs of some of the countries there (Bader, Lieberthal, & McDevitt, 2014). The U.S. does not claim territory, but it has used the language of freedom of navigation and order as provided by UNCLOS as the public face of its presence, and much of the western and regional literature is now written in these terms (Hayat & Hashmi, 2019). Historical work has demonstrated that as much as on the Convention of 1982, contemporary claims are based on maps, occupation and colonial inheritance, and that the discoveries of hydrocarbon potential in 1969 contributed to the transposition of an older space of fishing and navigation into a space of national assertion (Hayton, 2014).

The second cluster focuses on Chinese strategy and American counter strategy. Island building studies have recorded the transformation of reefs into airstrips and air defence structures, and considered this work as part of a long process of controlling sea lanes and increasing the chance of extra regional navies intervening (Green & Medeiros, 2016). In the United States, emphasis has been placed on operations in support of Freedom of Navigation, aimed at challenging what Washington considers excessive maritime claims, as well as increased regional partner combined exercises. Unintended escalation can be a risk, given the military density that will result from the absence of reliable crisis management even if neither capital wants war (Mastro, 2020). No one has been more interested in the 2016 award, which repelled claims to historic rights beyond UNCLOS, concluded that a number of the occupied features could not be the basis for an EEZ, and challenged Chinese activities within Philippine waters, which Beijing has refused to apply (Talmon, 2022).

The third cluster relates to regional responses. The conflict undermines Southeast Asian security, Green and Medeiros say, because it compels the governments of Vietnam, the Philippines and others to choose between their economic ties with China and their own security. But Carlyle Thayer has found the conflict in a larger trend of major power rivalry

where ASEAN has failed to form a unified stance on the Chinese threat partly because member countries interpret the threat differently and partly because consensus diplomacy can be easily stalled (Thayer, 2017). Hedging, moderation in relation to the USA, and intra ASEAN fragmentation are thus considered as structural characteristics and not as a passing bewilderment. In Ian Storey's later work, he highlights the two main protagonists of China and the United States, along with the involvement of extra regional states in shaping the outcome and the course of the conflict; he adds the aspirations of the Chinese side, the military presence of the American side, and the diplomacy of ASEAN (Storey, 2021).

Important questions remain unanswered in the same literature. How the rivalries of the two great powers have affected the force structure, basing and alliance choice of Southeast Asian defence establishments has been less systematically explored than the rhetoric of the two. It is often said but not so much measured about the long-term impact of Japan, India and Australia in the matter of deterrence and on ASEAN centrality. There is also limited work that covers the entirety of the rivalry, starting with the island-building in the wake of 2013, through the 2016 award to grey zone incidents at Second Thomas Shoal and other features in the early 2020s. This article does not leave that gap and offers a theoretical framework that considers militarisation, legal contest and regional alignment in tandem as part of a single phase in time, the 'intense competition' that spans the 2010 to 2024 period, and not as a series of separate crises (Bateman, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

The study analyzes the behavior of the United States and China in the South China Sea using the concept of offensive realism as outlined by John Mearsheimer, a structural approach to international politics that assumes states have to take care of themselves, so they aim for as much power as possible to potential rivals in the absence of a central authority. Great powers don't just uphold the status quo in this world. Because they are looking for regional primacy, which is the most reliable form of security in an uncertain system, and because they take offensive measures, such as military build ups and influencing the alignment of their neighbors, to preempt threats before they mature (Toft, 2005). The theory does not suggest the reckless leaders. It makes them pessimistic about other powerful states and thus loathes to leave a strategic vacuum unfilled.

This reasoning is very similar to what is happening in the South China Sea. China has expanded its naval forces, built militarized islands, and made territorial claims that would, if ratified, turn a shared sea into a region under Chinese dominance, all of which would be seen as an effort to become the regional hegemon and extend American maritime power outwards (Alenezi, 2020). Such a change has not been accepted by the United States. It has beefed up its patrolling, opened up Philippine facilities, and formed minilateral coalitions whose intent is to deny Beijing an uncontested sphere, which is also consistent with a status quo power, which fears the emergence of a peer competitor in a maritime theatre crucial to trade and alliance credibility (Chen, 2013). A state of mutual distrust is therefore expected, not a simple misunderstanding. Smaller states are squeezed to choose, hedge or hide and the theory suggests that competition will continue in this manner until the distribution of power is clearer or until a crisis forces costs upon both sides that they are willing to forego. Offensive realism is not a doctrine of inevitability of war. It states that peace, if it comes, will be one of deterrence and careful signaling and legal and diplomatic instruments will be functioning not beyond, but within, this game of position.

Objectives

The article pursues three objectives drawn from the underlying study.

1. To establish the prevalent reasons why the United States and China compete over the South China Sea.
2. To determine how China and the United States have pursued military and strategic interests in the South China Sea.
3. To determine the way the rivalry influences the safety of countries in Southeast Asia and the overall stability of the sea.

Research Questions

The inquiry is organised around three questions that correspond to those objectives and that structure the three substantive discussions that follow.

1. What has led the United States and China to seek dominance in the South China Sea?
2. What strategies have the United States and China employed in pursuit of their strategic interests in the South China Sea?
3. What are the consequences of the rivalry for the regional security dynamics of the South China Sea?

Methodology

The study is qualitatively designed because the object of the analysis, the geopolitical phenomenon, can be broken down into a single variable without losing the interaction of law, force and diplomacy. The research focuses on the critical incidents that happened from 2010 to 2024, including Chinese construction of artificial islands, the United States Freedom of Navigation Operations, the 2016 arbitral award, the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, grey zone confrontations at features like Second Thomas Shoal, and the reactions of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and other regional states. These cases are brought up to illustrate the two powers in operation and their intentions, not to provide a statistical model of conflict onset.

Primary and secondary evidence are used. Some of the primary sources are government documents, official statements, policy documents, speeches and the 2016 award from the arbitral tribunal in the Philippines' case against China. Secondary materials are journal articles, books, think tank papers and reporting from well-known news organisations. It is not an interview or field research method, but an analysis method of documentary analysis and process tracing, and its study is limited to the United States and China as the main competitors, the South China Sea as the geographic scope, and the impact of their competition on ASEAN members and extra regional partners. Diplomatic, military and political aspects are all covered. Economic interdependence is not considered a policy as a theory of peace, but as a limitation imposed on policy. It cannot see which cyber-underpinnings lie behind classified deliberations in Beijing or Washington, nor can it predict an imminent collision, but it can clearly trace the actors' public signals of capability and claims and test the expectations of offensive realism.

Historical Maritime Contest

The South China Sea is a region with centuries of trade and cultural interaction and the historical maps used by the Chinese government, and a purported connection with the sea dating back more than 2,000 years, on which contemporary Chinese claims are based, are counterbalanced by the historical maps of use, administration and proximity that Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries along its coasts possess. The potential of oil and gas resources became more volatile after the surveys in the late 1960s indicated that these resources were abundant in the seabed, as the hydrocarbon potential turned remote reefs into focuses of national planning and military investments (Chansoria, 2018). Operational knowledge of the sea was gained during the Vietnam War, and the United States was critical of China's growing territorial claims and insisted on passage for shipping and navy. However,

China has been calling the sea a core national interest and has built military installations and reclaimed land on contested features, which got the attention of the world when the US and China started using the theatre to test regional order (Bhatti, 2020).

This longer history is punctuated with specific incidents. Clashes with Vietnam in 1988 and occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995, in waters that the Philippines claimed, advertised a willingness on the part of the Chinese to change facts on the water, and they pushed threatened states toward closer security relations with the United States. ASEAN tried to defuse the conflict by using tools like the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties, but the Declaration was unable to solve the issue of sovereignty or prevent further land reclamation activities. UNCLOS provides a common language of 'territorial seas', 'exclusive economic zones' and 'continental shelves' but it does not provide a solution to the competing histories, and not everyone who uses UNCLOS does so in the same way (Koda, 2016). The consequence of this is a border dispute, but also one over who will govern a busy and rich sea.

Why the quarrel has grown out of the claimants is due to the strategic and economic stakes. Several trillion dollars of goods pass through these waters each year, including energy cargoes on which East Asian industry relies, and China's control of the sea would help ensure Chinese energy security while the open passage is viewed as a prerequisite for the predictability of commerce in Washington (Bader et al., 2014). Thus, competing interests on sea lanes and resources impact not only the military economic balance, but also the regional economic balance. The Nine Dash Line and Chinese island militarisation are all seen by neighbouring capitals as a challenge to UNCLOS and their own EEZs, and US responses include navigation operations and defence cooperation with the Philippines, Vietnam and Japan. Under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, American military personnel have more access to rotations at Philippine facilities, and this access, in the context of Chinese missiles and airstrips, has turned the sea into a test bed for Indo Pacific security (Roy, 2015).

China has signed and ratified UNCLOS with reservations that maintain her historical claim and the United States has not yet ratified but is referring to the navigational and zonal implications of the Convention to Chinese actions (Hayat & Hashmi, 2019). The most explosive legal issue on the water is where Chinese claims and the EEZs of Vietnam and the Philippines overlap. In 2016 the tribunal in this Philippines case ruled that the Convention took precedence over China's historic rights claim, that some of the features were ineligible for exclusive economic zones, and that some Chinese actions infringed Philippine rights. Washington has asserted his right to Freedom of Navigation Operations to emphasize a rules-based order. Beijing refused to recognize the award and persisted in enforcing its own rule over the zone as if the line had continuing legal force, which had the effect of deepening the strategic tensions and entanglements involving Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia in a complex security situation (Talmon, 2022).

There's a lot of claims on the map. China is by far the biggest claimant, relying on a map from the mid-20th century and ancient rights (as they see them), and has constructed and occupied structures in the Spratlys, Paracels and Scarborough Shoal and asserted exclusive economic zone and continental shelf rights that are more than other claimants believe under UNCLOS. Vietnam has claimed the Paracel and the Spratly archipelagos on the grounds of historical practice, the Convention, and they have resisted and garrisoned against Chinese pressure. The Philippines has laid claim to Scarborough Shoal and portions of the Spratlys, which are referred to in the Philippines as the Kalayaan Island Group, and won the 2016 award that China has disregarded, leaving Scarborough a flash point. China has been active in the vicinity of the Spratlys, which Indonesia does not claim, and even attempted to extend towards the North

Natuna Sea, which is Indonesia's, while Jakarta has been keen to prevent the South China Sea war of words from coalescing into this. Malaysia's position on James Shoal and other reefs and shoals is not recognised and claimed by Malaysia, and Malaysia refers to areas of their occupation and UNCLOS, which shows the overlap with China, Vietnam and the Philippines. Taiwan's position is similar to that of the People's Republic in that the Republic of China first used the dashed line, albeit Taipei's territorial position is focused on Itu Aba. Brunei's claim (which encompasses Louisa Reef on the continental shelf) is the least ambitious of all the claims and is not supported by a military garrison (Storey, 2021). The United States does not assert any rights or interests, and it does not seek to divide the sea in its favor through the 2016 award, but rather to limit the Chinese hegemony and promote coastal state rights and high seas freedoms (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

These paper claims have been supplemented with hardware in recent years. The United States has responded with navigation operations and joint exercises which Beijing calls interference, while China has deployed advanced missile systems and airstrips on features like Mischief Reef and Fiery Cross Reef. The Chinese ships have made several incursions into the waters the Vietnamese consider its exclusive economic zone, justifying their presence with reference to the Nine Dash Line which transects several zones in Southeast Asian countries (Fravel, 2018). The sea is the transport route for much of the world's trade and energy shipments; the impact of instability is not just on the claimants. The divergent histories and divergent readings of UNCLOS keep the legal battle alive and the increased spending on defence and calls for multilateral management have not yet yielded a compromise. The first section thus concludes that the South China Sea is historically rich, legally ambiguous, and strategically overrated, and thus an ideal location for great power rivalry.

Rival Strategic Interests

Both China and America view control over the South China Sea as tied to trade, security, and the drafting of maritime rules, making the region a flash point for Sino American conflict. The United States have no rocks or reefs, but they are very active, for international commerce, credibility of alliances, and the habit of open sea are all considered national interests. Washington is keen that disputes be settled in accordance with UNCLOS and peaceful means and has declared Chinese sovereignty claims over the majority of the sea unlawful and destabilizing (Fravel, 2018). It is reported that more than five trillion dollars of trade passes through the sea every year, a significant portion of which is American, and freedom of navigation is touted as an economic need and a legal concept (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2019). Partisanship aside, there has been continuity in policy. The Obama administration's pivot to Asia has been good for regional diplomacy and international law but not for Chinese island building. Since the 2016 award, the Trump administration has toughened the Free and Open Indo Pacific to give it a more militaristic spin, has raised the operational tempo and taken a more direct line on China's actions. Much of that attitude remained unchanged under the Biden administration, which highlighted coalitions such as the Quad and AUKUS and increased military engagement with the Philippines, which has once more been under pressure from China over disputed shoals (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Defence geography is a back-up to the commercial argument. The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which was subsequently expanded, allows the United States to have a quicker and more responsive response to contingencies in the South China Sea and near the Taiwan Strait from bases in the Philippines to which it has rotational access. Security aid and training, which cost tens of millions of dollars in recent years, is Vietnam's closest parallel to the way Washington has been creating a lattice of partners, not a hub. The American goals can

be stated as safeguarding of trade routes, support of allies & partners and maintaining a balance to ensure that the Chinese don't prevail and in this, the Americans do not need to make a territorial claim of their own (Zafar, 2020). Offensive realism would throw in that a hegemony in decline or of whose position is threatened would like the access of a rising peer as far from its own shores as possible which makes the first island chain and the sea lanes that run through it a natural line of contest (Chen, 2013).

China's are no less involved. China sees control of the sea as relevant to the security of energy imports that pass the Malacca Strait, often referred to as the Malacca Dilemma, and it sees the same waters as part of a larger effort to become a great power. In the last 10 years, it has resorted to coercion and paramilitary means when diplomacy fails to give it exclusive control, building airstrips, missiles and radar on man-made islands in the Spratly and Paracel groups, enabling the Chinese military to see and strike over a much larger area (Green & Medeiros, 2016). The 2016 award has been disregarded and domestic law enacted to allow enforcement in disputed waters. Grey zone operations involve pressure without resorting to open war, including confrontations with the Philippines at Second Thomas Shoal that involved the use of water cannon, using coast guard ships, fishing fleets, and maritime militia. These moves have led to the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia calling on the United States, Japan, and Australia for greater assistance and have coincided with the birth of AUKUS and a more active Quad, which Beijing sees as encirclement and which Washington views as long-delayed balancing (Mastro, 2020).

This two-sided campaign is already reflected on the regional security. Offensive realism demands that both states seek advantage and seek to spread their influence: the South China Sea today has been characterized by a standing tension rather than a single crisis. China has used reefs to create military bases to monitor traffic and increase the cost of an American response. The United States has stepped up deployments, drills, and navigation operations, including high visibility cooperation, such as exercises with a carrier strike group and the Philippine Navy in waters near Palawan, indicating its unwillingness to cede the sea as a Chinese lake (Li, 2023). Every step is an excuse for deterrence. They are together creating an environment in which miscalculations are more likely to occur, because of the greater density of their military ecology.

The regional coalitions have followed suit. Under Philippine access arrangements, the Americans can rotate their forces more quickly and more regular joint maneuvers are possible, which is what China calls containment. Beijing responds with its own action and by diplomatic protest, and the security architecture of the sea evolves, with deepening partnerships. Tactical friction can reemerge without an order to war, such as was the case with close encounters between Chinese coast guard and Philippine coast guard forces in Sabina Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Both sides don't seem to want to strike first, but both are fostering a presence to show resolve and that's why the open confrontation stays in the background and off the stage. The second section, then, concludes that American strategy is legalist and coalitional, that the Chinese strategy is physically and grey zonal, and that this interaction, not just the initial island conflicts, now propels the security issue.

Regional Security Dynamics

The South China Sea is an area of tension and competition not only because of the overlapping interests of various states in one strategic waterway, but also because under offensive realism, none of them can be sure that the other will maintain the restraint they desire. Competition for fish, oil, prestige and proliferation of claims over the Paracels, the Spratlys and Scarborough Shoal puts the missions of presence on a hair trigger. The local dispute is exacerbated by

outside intervention. In March 2023, a transit near the Paracels garnered a firm Chinese protest, while navigation operations around Chinese occupied features have been regular practice of the United States to strengthen the claim of freedom of passage and to challenge the legality of excessive straight baselines (Li, 2023). Equivalent operations and transits from the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia and France are read in Beijing as provocations, and in these capitals as a defence of public goods, which transforms a regional dispute into a broader area of power play (Bateman, 2017).

The institutional and military lack of confidence. Whereas ASEAN and some members would like to see multilateral dialogue and a meaningful code of conduct, China would like to see bilateral dialogue where their size is an advantage and that imbalance engenders suspicion and delays (SCMP, 2020). According to the theory of offensive realism, states fear relative gains and if they cooperate, they scan to see if the other side is doing better, and this is why it is so difficult to conclude long-term agreements and so easy to build arms and outposts in the interim. The financial layer compounds the insecurities instead of easing the situation. The area is estimated to account for about one-third of global maritime trade and an upheaval there would cost energy and manufacturing far from the reefs in dispute. Despite the increasing militaristic rhetoric of both China and the United States, trade ties between the two countries and the region have continued to expand, and thus there has been no lessening of the security dilemma (Bader et al., 2014).

The threat that the competition poses in terms of security can be enumerated with some accuracy. China has deployed fighter support, missiles, airstrips, and radar on the occupied islands and even deployed bombers on the islands like Woody Island, if it has to own the ocean by force (Vietnam Law & Legal Forum, 2022). A series of large-scale exercises with Australia, India and Japan has been mounted; the United States has been ramping up navy operations to test Chinese claims, and has been carrying out numerous Freedom of Navigation Operations in recent years. Stockpiles on both sides, access and platforms. The closer ships and aircraft operate, the greater the risk of unintended incidents, and the sea is a space where military power could be used for local defence as well as to demonstrate it (Mastro, 2020). The same curve applies to Alliance policy. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement has led to more Philippine locations in the vicinity of the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, and America's security support for Vietnam has persisted as Hanoi is not prepared to fully recognize China's claims. Threatened states reinforce their own defenses not to out compete China, but to achieve a minimum deterrent and a friend in a crisis (Thayer, 2017).

The regional power dynamics are thus in motion. China wants to become the big power in Asia and uses both military force and economic enticement. The United States, as a resident extra regional power, works with coastal states to ensure that the Chinese do not close off the sea, by training, arming, and politically supporting Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Corresponding increases have been made in defence expenditure. China's military spending during the 10 years from 2012 to 2021 grew at a rapid rate, and official military spending has continued to rise since that period, as have the military budgets of the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, albeit at a slower pace, and Thailand, but at a smaller rate. This is not an effort to "overcome" China, but rather an effort to not be helpless: hence analysts talk about minimal deterrence, not a new arms race in the classical sense (Feng & He, 2018). Rise of China and determination of America to stay is the contradiction that makes the sea one of the most disputed ones in the world.

Escalation risk is a consequence of density. Compared to the times when the reefs were only occupied by a handful of armed organisations it is easier to imagine accidents or uncontrolled

fight taking place, because they are taking place in a limited area. President Xi's government has aimed to consolidate a favourable status quo and might yet resort to some degree of force to assert claims, while Washington is worried that a Chinese fait accompli would see its influence on a sea it considers key to its broader Indo Pacific policy get swept away. Several governments are sitting one wrong turn away from a crisis they don't want due to the Philippine American defence relationship, Vietnam's increasing security cooperation with the United States, and the forces surrounding the contested shoals (Mastro, 2020). Extra regional navies add more flags to the water. China also does not give up its claim as it attempts to maintain trade lines with the very countries it pressures. Territorial claims, suspicion, and the significance of the shipping lanes merge and a minor mishap could escalate the situation in a manner that will harm all nations bordering the ocean. The third section concludes that today, regional security dynamics are no longer just about the initial legal dossiers, but the militarized, coalitional and accident-prone system on top of them, brought about by the presence of great power rivalry.

Conclusion

The South China Sea is a sea of energy, food and international trade, as well as a congested legal arena where China pushes the historic dashed line, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam push lines of their own, and Taiwan pushes a line of its own, while Indonesia pushes a line of its own, all in the surrounding areas. The U.S. doesn't own any of the land and still refuses to back down on freedom of navigation, calling on its smaller coastal state partners to do the same and challenging China's maritime claims that now encompass islands that are dotted with airstrips, radars and missiles. The sea has been increasingly militarized with American naval operations and defence treaties, such as with the Philippines. Tension is created between the two powers and increases the likelihood of accident or war, because both want to demonstrate superiority.

The competition is felt throughout the region. China is pushing for reinforcement of claims and for its own empowerment, the U.S. for influence and to protect trade routes, and other nations like the United Kingdom and France, Japan and Australia, also to navigate and be present. There is not much trust and a little mistake can have a lot of effects. China's use of military power goes hand in hand with economic ties, whereas America counters with military alliances and not a comparable commercial proposition, which makes the balance of power precarious. The key findings of the study are that militarisation has been increasing, along with the potential for unintended clashes; that the security of claimant states has weakened as the region has become more sectoral in its relations between Chinese pressure and American support; and that the conflicting interpretations of international law have undermined confidence and made management more difficult. Where a common legal language should exist, it is unclear what happens when a Chinese historical claim is pitted against an American defence of an order derived from UNCLOS.

The practical implications are a follow-on of those findings. Wherever possible, direct military presence should be avoided if it can be replaced with regular and forthright communications, and both capitals should maintain lines of communication that can prevent an incident from escalating into a campaign. Contact can be established around common issues which are not zero sum (environmental protection, disaster response, etc.) to foster habits of contact while sovereignty is still in question, and small de-confliction activities at sea can be implemented to minimize the risk of collision. Even if the parties do not agree on certain features, respect for the law of the sea as the basis for conduct, including the Convention which provides the only generally accepted map of maritime zones, is the safest course to take in the defence of

national interest. Great power competition will not end with diplomacy, the rule of law, and multilateral process. But they can still prevent that competition becoming a war that none of the coastal states can afford and neither of the two principals.

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