



## Territorial disputes in the South China Sea and their impact on international relations

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### Abstract

The South China Sea is witnessing a complex regional dispute due to overlapping sovereignty claims over islands and resource-rich waters, particularly by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. The roots of the conflict lie in historical, strategic, and economic factors, with China seeking to expand its influence through the "Nine-Dash Line," raising concerns among neighboring countries. International positions vary; while the United States and Japan advocate for freedom of navigation and the containment of Chinese influence, some countries tend to remain neutral. Major powers play a decisive role, with Washington using its military presence to support its regional allies, while Beijing strengthens its maritime presence and infrastructure. This conflict has led to diplomatic tensions, a regional arms race, and a division among major powers, highlighting its profound impact on the international order and the geopolitical balance in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Keywords:** Territorial Disputes-South China Sea-international relations

### Introduction

The regional disputes in the South China Sea are among the most prominent contemporary geopolitical issues, drawing increasing attention from both regional and international powers. This sea is of vital strategic importance, serving as a major maritime corridor through which over one-third of global maritime trade passes. It also contains vast reserves of oil and natural gas, in addition to rich fishing grounds. The overlapping sovereign claims by several littoral states — including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei — have led to chronic political and security tensions, occasionally escalating into limited maritime confrontations. China stands out as a major actor in this conflict, relying on the so-called "Nine-Dash Line" to justify its historical claims to sovereignty over most of the South China Sea. These claims conflict with those of other countries and contradict international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). On the other hand, the United States seeks to uphold freedom of navigation in the region and opposes any attempts to impose a status quo by force, which has added a more complex international dimension to the conflict.

This research examines the impact of these disputes on international relations by analyzing the interactions among major powers, regional alliances, and the effects of these tensions on security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. It also explores the legal and political dimensions of the conflict. Understanding the nature of these disputes not only contributes to analyzing the current geopolitical situation but also helps anticipate the future of international relations amid increasing competition over resources and strategic maritime passages around the world.

### Significance of the Study

This study derives its significance from the fact that it addresses one of the most critical geopolitical flashpoints in the modern world: the regional disputes in the South China Sea, which now pose a serious challenge to both regional and international security and stability. The conflict is not

limited to border disputes between neighboring countries but fundamentally reflects a complex intersection of strategic, economic, and political interests of regional and global powers — most notably China and the United States. The study contributes to the analysis of the conflict's dimensions from the perspectives of international relations and international law. It also illustrates how regional disputes can escalate into international conflicts that threaten strategic balances in the Asia-Pacific region and impact freedom of navigation and global trade.

### Objectives of the Study

This study aims to understand the historical and political roots of the South China Sea disputes, with a focus on the disputing states and the nature of their territorial claims. It also seeks to clarify the strategic and economic significance of the region and how this importance contributes to the escalation of tensions. Furthermore, the study concentrates on the role of major powers, particularly China and the United States, in shaping the course of the conflict and influencing regional and international balances.

It also aims to analyze how this dispute affects international relations by reviewing political and security alliances in the region. Lastly, the study seeks to anticipate the future trajectory of the conflict and determine its potential implications for the international system amid escalating competition among great powers over vital resources and maritime routes.

### Research Problem

The central research problem this study seeks to address is: How do regional disputes in the South China Sea affect the structure of international relations, especially in light of growing geopolitical competition among regional and global powers?

What are the implications of this conflict for both regional and international security?

### Research Hypothesis

The regional disputes in the South China Sea contribute to reshaping international relations by escalating tensions

among major powers, redistributing regional alliances, and undermining stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive analytical approach to examine the nature of the regional disputes in the South China Sea and to interpret their geopolitical and legal dimensions. A comparative approach is also used to highlight the differing positions of the disputing countries and major global powers regarding the crisis. In addition, the historical method is applied to trace the development of the conflict over time, while the legal method is used to assess the extent to which regional positions align with international maritime law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

### Structure of the Study

#### The study consists of an introduction and three main sections

Section One focuses on the geographical background and strategic importance of the South China Sea.

Section Two explores the nature of the dispute and the key actors involved.

Section Three examines the impact of the South China Sea conflict on international relations and regional security.

#### The study concludes with a conclusion and key findings.

#### Section One: Geographic Background and Strategic Importance of the South China Sea

The South China Sea is one of the most prominent maritime areas in the world in terms of geographical location and strategic importance. It connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and a significant portion of global trade passes through it. Rich in marine resources and situated in a sensitive region, the sea has become a focal point for regional and international competition and one of the most significant geopolitical flashpoints in Asia.

#### Strategic Importance of the South China Sea

In terms of location and importance, the South China Sea lies to the south of the People's Republic of China and stretches from Singapore in the south to the Taiwan Strait in the north. It covers an estimated area of around 3,500,000 square kilometers. It is considered part of the Pacific Ocean and separates Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, the Philippines, and Brunei. To the west, it connects to one of the world's most vital maritime passages the Strait of Malacca while to the east, it links to the East China Sea via the Taiwan Strait.

The South China Sea is classified as a semi-enclosed sea, as it connects to the Pacific Ocean to the east and to the Indian Ocean to the west through narrow straits and maritime passages. It extends from Taiwan Island in the north to the islands of Kalimantan and Sumatra in the south. To the east, it borders the Philippine archipelago, while to the west it connects to the Indochina Peninsula and the Malay Peninsula.

The sea contains several disputed island groups, including the Dongsha Islands, Xisha (Paracel) Islands, Zhongsha Islands, and Nansha (Spratly) Islands. These islands vary in size and form, comprising coral reefs, small islands, and sandy shoals. The Nansha Islands are the largest in both number and area and are the most significant in terms of maritime reach.

The geopolitical importance of the South China Sea stems from its vital location, serving as a main artery for global trade. Major maritime shipping routes connecting East and South Asia with various parts of the world pass through this sea, making it a strategic hub and an area of increasing regional and international rivalry<sup>[1]</sup>.

The South China Sea represents one of the world's key maritime arteries for global trade, with more than half of the world's commercial vessels passing through its waters, which underscores its immense strategic significance. The total value of goods transported through this route is estimated at over 5 trillion US dollars annually—more than the combined GDP of India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The importance of the sea is not limited to trade alone—it is also rich in natural resources, particularly energy. According to estimates by the United States Geological Survey, the region may contain around 28 billion barrels of oil. Chinese estimates, which are more optimistic, suggest the total reserves across the entire South China Sea may reach up to 213 billion barrels. So far, most of the actual discoveries have been of natural gas, with fields primarily located in maritime zones belonging to Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines<sup>[2]</sup>.

As one of the most vital corridors for global trade, the South China Sea sees a substantial portion of energy and goods transported through it. Estimates indicate that more than half of global shipping passes through the Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda Straits before entering the South China Sea. Oil shipments, liquefied natural gas, coal, and iron make up the bulk of this trade. Annually, more than 100,000 container ships and commercial vessels traverse this route, most of which head toward East Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. For this reason, the South China Sea is considered an economic lifeline of critical importance to many countries around the world<sup>[3]</sup>.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), the South China Sea is considered one of the most important global maritime routes for crude oil transport. Its strategic importance is reflected in the following points

1. Over 30% of global seaborne crude oil trade in 2016 passed through the South China Sea, amounting to 15 million barrels of oil per day. More than 90% of the crude oil that flowed through the South China Sea came via the Strait of Malacca, the shortest maritime route between suppliers in Africa and the Arabian Gulf and markets in Asia.
2. Approximately 1.4 million barrels of oil per day pass from the Strait of Malacca to Singapore and the western coast of Malaysia, where it is refined before continuing through the South China Sea. Furthermore, the South China Sea is a key commercial route for oil from the Middle East, with over 70% of such shipments transiting the sea in 2016.
3. In addition to being a major transit route for imported oil from the Middle East and Africa, regional countries bordering the South China Sea also contribute to the total volume of crude oil shipments through the sea. Malaysia and Indonesia together accounted for 5% of the oil shipments passing through the South China Sea, while Singapore's shipments made up around 2% of regional crude oil traffic.
4. The South China Sea also serves as a significant trade route among the littoral states, as goods and

merchandise move between the ports of these countries through the sea <sup>[4]</sup>.

The Vietnamese scholar Pham Quang Minh highlighted the commercial importance of the South China Sea, stating:

It is no exaggeration to say that whoever controls the South China Sea controls the global economy, as it serves as the link between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. Most energy supplies heading to China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan pass through this sea—making the South China Sea a lifeline for the economies of East Asia <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **Section Two: The Nature of the Dispute in the South China Sea and the Key Actors**

The dispute in the South China Sea is among the most complex maritime conflicts in the world, due to the intertwining of historical, legal, and geopolitical dimensions. The core of the conflict centers on sovereignty claims over islands and strategic maritime routes, contested by several Asian countries and fueled by significant economic and military interests. The growing importance of the sea has turned the dispute from a regional issue into a multilateral international concern.

The roots of the South China Sea dispute trace back to a sovereignty map officially issued by China in 1914, which laid the foundation for what later became known as the "Nine-Dash Line" the boundary of China's claim to the majority of the sea. In the 1930s, the map underwent extensive revisions, expanding China's claim southward to include the Pratas and Spratly Islands. By 1935, China initiated a comprehensive geographic survey of the islands in the sea, which led to the naming of 132 islands and maritime features by an international committee. These names were subsequently included in the world atlas that same year.

These historic Chinese claims remain the starting point of a continuing regional dispute. China insists on its sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, while neighboring countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei reject these claims, relying on international law especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The dispute is further deepened by the region's strategic significance and vast energy resources, including large oil and gas reserves. Natural gas also contributes to the region's importance, and the South China Sea is considered one of the busiest maritime routes in the world. All these factors make the sea a geopolitical and economic flashpoint, where complex regional and international interests intersect <sup>[6]</sup>.

Since 2003, China has occupied a leading position in the global energy market, becoming the second-largest oil consumer. In 2005, it rose to become the second-largest oil importer. With its growing economic and industrial demands, China's energy consumption is expected to increase rapidly in the coming years. The country depends heavily on oil imports that arrive via strategic maritime passages, with nearly 80% of these imports passing through the Strait of Malacca, a critical component of the South China Sea.

This heavy reliance led former Chinese President Hu Jintao to express concern about the security of this maritime corridor, describing the need to secure it as "China's Malacca Dilemma". This term reflects Beijing's deep

strategic concern regarding the South China Sea, both in terms of energy security and national defense <sup>[7]</sup>.

The South China Sea represents a regional conflict zone, where littoral states compete to assert sovereignty, each presenting what it considers legal and historical evidence to support its claims—especially in the face of China's extensive assertions. These conflicting positions have complicated the regional landscape and intensified tensions. The South China Sea is the stage for a complex regional dispute involving multiple countries, each with its own strategic interests and historical backgrounds. The key claimants are

#### **The Philippines**

The Philippines' claims in the South China Sea date back to 1898, following the Spanish-American War, when Spain ceded the Philippines' land and waters to the United States under the Treaty of Paris. After gaining independence in July 1946, then-Vice President Elpidio Quirino declared that the Spratly Islands had historically been under Philippine sovereignty.

On July 10, 1971, President Ferdinand Marcos proclaimed that the Spratly Islands were an integral part of the Philippines, stating that China's presence there posed a direct threat to national security <sup>[8]</sup>.

In 2013, the Philippines brought the case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), seeking a legal resolution to the dispute. China, however, rejected the process, refusing to recognize the court's authority or the involvement of any external party, insisting that such matters should be resolved bilaterally, given the strategic importance of the region to its national policy <sup>[9]</sup>.

#### **Malaysia**

Malaysia's claims in the South China Sea began in 1978, based on a 1969 agreement with Indonesia concerning the delimitation of the continental shelf. On that basis, Malaysia claimed 12 islands within the Spratly Islands, a claim it illustrated in a 1979 map. This move was rejected by China, which insisted that these islands are part of its territory <sup>[10]</sup>. Despite similarities between the Malaysia-China dispute and China's disputes with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam, strong economic and political ties between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing, along with the geographic distance of the disputed islands from mainland China, have helped ease tensions between the two sides compared to other cases <sup>[11]</sup>.

#### **Taiwan**

Like China, Taiwan claims most of the South China Sea, based on the eleven-dash line map issued in 1947. However, Taiwan's actual control is limited to Pratas Island in the north, and Itu Aba Island (Taiping)—the largest of the Spratly Islands. Taiwan has strengthened its presence on these islands. In 2003, the Interior Minister visited the area, and the government task force on the South China Sea, originally established in 1992, was reactivated in 2000, the plan to construct an airstrip on Itu Aba Island was revived, and construction was completed in 2008. This reflects Taipei's commitment to reinforcing its sovereignty over the territories it controls <sup>[12]</sup>.

#### **Vietnam**

Vietnam's stance represents one of the most significant challenges to China's claims in the South China Sea.

Vietnam asserts full sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, considering them part of "Khanh Hoa" Province. Vietnam's claims are based on historical events dating back to the 17th century<sup>[13]</sup>. In 1974, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement reaffirming its sovereignty over the area, which it reiterated in 1981 with documents citing historical acknowledgments by European explorers and missionaries who had visited the region, thereby strengthening its legal and historical position against China's claims<sup>[14]</sup>.

### Brunei

Brunei's claims in the South China Sea are based on a British decree issued in 1954, which outlined the geographical boundaries of Borneo Island, where the Sultanate is located. Brunei also relies on an official map published in 1988, which shows its continental shelf extending 350 nautical miles—exceeding the 200-nautical-mile limit set by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. These claims conflict with those of China and Taiwan and also overlap with the Philippines' claims in delineating maritime economic zones<sup>[15]</sup>.

The dispute in the South China Sea has evolved from bilateral disagreements into an international issue that has gone through three main phases. Before 2002, the conflict was limited to bilateral confrontations between China and neighboring countries, without a regional framework. The second phase (2002–2010) saw the first attempt at collective management, marked by the signing of the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties" between China and ASEAN, aimed at reducing tensions and promoting peaceful dialogue. The third phase (from 2010 to the present) has been characterized by the internationalization of the dispute, especially following a speech by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who expressed support for a multilateral solution based on international law, while affirming that freedom of navigation in the region is a strategic interest for the United States<sup>[16]</sup>.

This marked a significant turning point in the trajectory of the South China Sea dispute, as it contributed to its internationalization and signaled a clear shift in the U.S. position—from relative neutrality to active involvement as a key player. The United States did not act alone; rather, it encouraged other countries outside the region, such as Australia, Japan, and India, to engage with the issue. Consequently, the dispute began to take on increasingly international dimensions, becoming more closely tied to the security and strategic arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region<sup>[17]</sup>.

Despite the U.S. adopting a policy described as "careful abstention from intervention" in South China Sea disputes, the rise of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia prompted former President Barack Obama's administration to reconsider its regional policy. Washington began adopting a more assertive approach toward China, manifested in strengthening its military and strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

This shift was accompanied by extensive media coverage, reflecting a clear American desire to contain China's rise and to reshape the regional balance of power. The Obama administration launched the so-called "Pivot to Asia" strategy, which represented a shift in U.S. policy from focusing solely on commercial interests in Southeast Asia to a broader strategy aimed at politically and militarily

encircling China. This was to be achieved through alliance-building, signing security treaties, and establishing military bases in allied countries across the region<sup>[18]</sup>.

In January 2013, Admiral Robert Willard, then Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, announced that the U.S. military was seeking to establish a network of military outposts near major maritime routes in Southeast Asia—an effort aimed at enhancing U.S. military deployment in this vital region. This announcement extended a strategic direction revealed earlier by the U.S. Department of Defense, particularly in June 2012, when then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated at a security conference in Singapore that the United States intended to reposition its naval forces so that the majority would be based in the Pacific by 2020.

According to this plan, the structure of the U.S. fleet would shift from an even 50/50 split between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to a new distribution of 60% in the Pacific and 40% in the Atlantic. This change reflects growing U.S. interest in the Asia-Pacific theater as a strategic priority. The shift was also accompanied by vigorous efforts to strengthen existing military alliances with regional countries, as well as bolstering the U.S. presence at its traditional bases, such as those in Japan, South Korea, and Guam. All of this highlights Washington's aim to tighten the strategic belt around China and curb its growing maritime influence<sup>[19]</sup>.

From the U.S. strategic perspective, the South China Sea holds great importance due to its vital geographical location and potential natural resource reserves—particularly oil and gas. Additionally, control over this maritime area would allow China to strengthen its position as a global power competing with the United States. From this standpoint, Washington views any Chinese dominance over the sea as a threat that could undermine America's role in Asia and reshape the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

On the other hand, China views the South China Sea as a strategic pillar for achieving its global ambitions. Chinese general and military analyst Peng Guangqian, who also serves as Deputy Secretary-General of the Chinese National Security Forum, affirms that this sea represents a fundamental test of "Chinese glory" and is as important as other core issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Official statements indicate that the Chinese leadership firmly believes in the necessity of "restoring" sovereignty over this area as part of its broader national strategic project<sup>[20]</sup>.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing has engaged in multiple negotiations to resolve its land border disputes with neighboring countries, demonstrating relative flexibility in settling those issues through diplomatic channels. However, China's stance on maritime boundaries—particularly the South China Sea—remained ambiguous, with no official position for several years.

This changed on September 9, 1958, when the Chinese government issued an official statement on its territorial waters, marking the first clear declaration of China's claims in the South China Sea. This statement represented a turning point in China's approach to defining its maritime borders and asserting sovereignty over vast areas of this vital sea<sup>[21]</sup>. In March 1988, Chinese forces took control of parts of the Spratly Islands after violent clashes with Vietnamese forces. Since then, China has gradually extended its influence over

the Spratlys and most of the South China Sea. This incident, along with China's unilateral actions, triggered concern and unrest among Southeast Asian nations, prompting them to collectively reject China's behavior and call for negotiations. However, the incident served as a wake-up call for these countries, making it clear that the South China Sea is a core issue for China and that its strategy in the region would be long-term and tied to broader strategic interests<sup>[22]</sup>.

At the international level, China made its first explicit declaration regarding its claims in the South China Sea through diplomatic notes submitted to the United Nations. On May 7, 2009, China presented a note numbered (CML/7/2009), in response to a joint request made by Vietnam and Malaysia to delimit the continental shelf boundaries between them. China attached to this note a map showing what is known as the "Nine-Dash Line," marking the first official use of this map as supporting evidence for its claims.

In the content of the note, China affirmed its full sovereignty over the South China Sea, clearly stating that "China enjoys indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the surrounding waters." The note also stated that "China has sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters, including the seabed and subsoil," emphasizing that this position represents a firm policy of the Chinese government, widely recognized by the international community. China requested that this note be circulated to all United Nations member states<sup>[23]</sup>.

China's repeated statements on the importance of the South China Sea and its declared intention to strengthen control over it have prompted the United States to intensify its military presence in the region. This has occurred through an increased deployment of naval forces, sending more warships, and conducting joint exercises and maneuvers with its allies in Southeast Asia, as part of a comprehensive strategy aimed at containing China's expansion and enhancing deterrence<sup>[24]</sup>.

Thus, it can be said that the dispute in the South China Sea represents a complex and intertwined model where geography overlaps with politics, as regional claims intersect with major international stakes. While China seeks to consolidate its dominance based on historical justifications, the United States and its allies move to contain this expansion within a broader strategic vision. The severity of the dispute arises from its unresolved nature, the divergence of positions, and the interlocking interests, making it a constant source of tension threatening the stability and security of the Indo-Pacific region.

### **Section Three: Security and Economic Implications of the South China Sea Dispute**

The dispute in the South China Sea is among the most complex issues in contemporary international politics due to the intertwining of strategic, economic, and security interests among several regional and international powers. This sea is not only a vital trade route through which a large proportion of global trade passes but also encompasses vast reserves of natural resources, primarily oil and gas, making it a focal point for geopolitical competition. The escalating conflicting sovereignty claims, particularly by China and several Southeast Asian countries, have led to increased tensions directly affecting regional stability.

International interventions, especially by the United States and its allies, have contributed to internationalizing the

dispute and transforming it from a regional matter into an issue of global security. As China continues to enhance its military presence on the disputed islands, concerns grow over the possibility of military confrontations or uncontrolled escalation that could destabilize the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, this dispute threatens not only regional security but also casts shadows over the global balance of power and relations among major powers.

The ongoing regional disputes in the South China Sea play a pivotal role affecting regional security in Asia, with broader implications for international stability. This crisis can be seen as a crucial test of China's capabilities and ambitions to reshape the existing regional order, especially amid rising geopolitical competition between the United States, which maintains strong influence in the region, and China, which is rapidly modernizing its armed forces within the context of globalization. These tensions highlight Beijing's readiness to challenge established security and political arrangements, making the South China Sea dispute an important indicator of the future international order.

From a security perspective, the South China Sea dispute is likely to contribute to escalating tensions between the two great powers, the United States and China, potentially becoming a flashpoint for a broader conflict between them. In this context, prominent American scholar Joseph S. Nye points out that history reveals a recurring pattern: the rise of a new power provokes anxiety and fear among its neighbors and the existing dominant powers. According to Nye, this fear can act as a catalyst for conflicts, even when they begin with small or unintended incidents, which may escalate into a series of uncontrolled reactions leading eventually to catastrophic confrontations. This analysis highlights the fragility and severity of the situation in the South China Sea and its threat to regional and international stability if escalations between the major powers intensify<sup>[25]</sup>.

With escalating tensions between China and the United States in the South China Sea, Beijing has sought to curb American influence in the region through a dual strategy. On one hand, it has strengthened political and diplomatic relations with several neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore by increasing official visits and expanding bilateral cooperation. On the other hand, China has notably developed its military capabilities on land, sea, and air by modernizing its arsenal, developing ballistic missiles, and deploying submarines in strategic areas of the Pacific Ocean.

These moves have alarmed Washington, which views China as a direct threat to its allies in East Asia, particularly Japan and South Korea. The United States has also accused China of militarizing the disputed islands in the South China Sea, considering this an attempt to change the status quo by force. In response, Washington has deployed medium-range land-based missiles in Asia in an effort to contain China's growing influence and reaffirm its commitment to the security of its allies in the region<sup>[26]</sup>.

The U.S. response has not been limited to operational measures but also included increased defense spending related to the region, with military funding rising to approximately 50 billion in [year] In 2014, which is approximately double the allocations of 2013, indicating a clear shift by the United States from mere monitoring to a more active and interventionist policy.

Washington also sought to consolidate its regional and international alliances by revitalizing the Quadrilateral

Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes Japan, Australia, and India alongside the United States, as a political and security umbrella to coordinate against maritime threats and challenges posed by Chinese influence. More assertively, the United States announced in 2021 the formation of the AUKUS alliance with Britain and Australia, involving the exchange of sensitive defense technologies, especially in nuclear submarines and artificial intelligence, which Beijing regarded as a direct threat to the military balance in the region<sup>[27]</sup>.

China's response to these moves was escalatory in tone, with Beijing describing the AUKUS and QUAD alliances as an "Asian version of NATO," aimed at encircling China and curbing its peaceful rise, according to official Chinese rhetoric. It also warned that these alliances would lead to the militarization of the region and drag it into a dangerous arms race, asserting its full right to protect its sovereignty and strategic interests in the South China Sea.

With Donald Trump's presidency, the American rhetoric concerning the South China Sea took on a harsher tone. Explicit accusations were directed at China for violating international norms through its practices in the South China Sea, considering its behavior as undermining the existing stability.

The State Department under Trump adopted a similar stance, strongly condemning Chinese actions, particularly regarding its "non-negotiable" sovereignty claims over disputed areas, which were seen as a direct challenge to international law and American interests in the region<sup>[28]</sup>.

The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy explicitly stated that China's activities, foremost among them the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, constitute a destabilizing factor for the region and pose a threat to freedom of navigation and the free flow of global trade, while undermining the sovereignty of the littoral states over these contested waters.

The strategy viewed Beijing as increasingly leveraging its military power and economic capabilities to influence other countries and gain strategic advantages at the expense of the existing international order. It described the geopolitical competition in the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a contest between two opposing global models: one embodying freedom and openness, represented by the West led by the United States, and the other based on repression and control, expressed by the rise of authoritarian powers like China<sup>[29]</sup>.

Despite relying heavily on military power in its policy toward the South China Sea, successive U.S. administrations have not neglected political, diplomatic, and economic tools. They have adopted multiple initiatives to enhance economic partnerships with regional countries, alongside expanding trade and technological relations on bilateral and multilateral levels. Moreover, they have increasingly focused on developing political and diplomatic relations to consolidate their influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Washington's policymakers recognize the South China Sea as a vital strategic interest for the United States, representing a continued commitment to protecting the security of its partners and allies in the region<sup>[30]</sup>.

In this context, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper confirmed that the country adopts a firmer stance in dealing with China's moves in the South China Sea. He declared that the United States is determined to strengthen its naval presence in this sensitive area as a step to "counter China's

aggressive and escalating behavior." This statement clearly reflects Washington's orientation toward a direct deterrence strategy based on a strong military presence to ensure freedom of navigation and support allies against the growing Chinese influence.

These developments confirm that the South China Sea is no longer merely a regional dispute arena but has transformed into a major geopolitical battleground between two great powers, where national security calculations, economic interests, and the competition for leadership of the international order intersect<sup>[31]</sup>.

In addition to foreign interventions, especially the American ones, they represent one of the most prominent security repercussions resulting from escalating maritime disputes in the South China Sea. The United States seeks to leverage the existing tensions in this strategic region to strengthen its military and political presence, enabling it to expand its influence and ensure its ability to impact developments, particularly regarding freedom of navigation and securing international trade routes.

The severity of these interventions is exacerbated by the possibility of the United States, supported by regional allies such as Japan, resorting to direct military interventions if commercial or military vessels in the South China Sea face any threats. This scenario raises fears of escalation that could lead to open confrontation, especially with the increasing military buildups and tensions between China and neighboring countries<sup>[32]</sup>.

From an economic standpoint, achieving stability in the South China Sea is a common goal sought by both China and the other countries involved in this dispute, given its immense strategic and economic importance. Any escalation or outbreak of conflict between the parties involved would not only threaten the security of this vital passage but would have wide-ranging repercussions on regional stability and international trade. The South China Sea is considered one of the most important maritime navigation routes globally, through which a large portion of global trade passes, making its stability a crucial element in maintaining the smooth functioning of the global economic system<sup>[33]</sup>.

Any Chinese escalation in regional disputes, whether with neighboring countries or with the United States, would impose heavy costs on Beijing that could undermine the gains of decades of economic reform and trade openness. Pursuing hostile policies in the South China Sea would not only threaten China's relations with its regional and international partners but could also jeopardize its active participation in the global system—the very system that has significantly supported its economic rise and geopolitical ascent.

Moreover, any potential conflict between China and the United States would occur close to Chinese shores, meaning that the direct economic and security repercussions would be more severe for Beijing than for Washington. This reality heightens concerns that the South China Sea dispute could become a major threat to regional stability and negatively affect the balance of international relations, especially given the intertwined economic and security interests of the major powers and the regional countries<sup>[34]</sup>.

Maritime straits are strategically vital passages in global trade, serving as essential arteries for maritime transport connecting continents and centers of production and consumption. Among these straits, the Strait of Malacca stands out as one of the world's most important sea routes.

It gains additional strategic importance due to its direct connection to the South China Sea, serving as its western gateway and a primary transit point for vessels coming from the Indian Ocean heading towards East Asia. Given its critical geographical position linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it is also used as a main route for transporting huge volumes of energy and goods between the Middle East and Asia, and between Europe and East Asia.

Any threat targeting the security of the Strait of Malacca is not merely a local threat but a direct danger to the security and safety of international maritime navigation routes. Disruption, closure, or even threats to this passage could cause significant disturbances to international maritime traffic, with broad negative economic impacts on the countries bordering the strait and on major economic powers dependent on maritime supplies passing through it<sup>[35]</sup>.

The Strait of Malacca is a key route for global energy flows, with massive quantities of oil passing through, especially from Gulf countries to Asian markets. Estimates indicate that any disruption in maritime traffic in this region would directly impact oil supplies, which are expected to decline from about 2.5 million barrels per day to 1.7 million barrels by 2040, due to increasing threats and maritime disputes, particularly in the South China Sea<sup>[36]</sup>.

Should tensions escalate between Beijing and the ASEAN countries, the latter might resort to strategic pressure tactics, including threatening to close the Strait of Malacca to Chinese interests—posing a direct threat to a vital route China relies on for securing its energy and trade needs. With rising escalation, ASEAN countries may feel compelled to seek support from the United States, allowing an unofficial naval blockade on China through the Strait of Malacca, thereby opening the door for enhanced American control over this strategic passage.

China views any attempt to turn the Strait of Malacca into a tool of American pressure on its interests as a highly serious strategic threat. It considers American maritime influence over the strait as an infringement on its sovereignty and status, pushing it into a state of “maritime dependency” within the Washington-led international order. Worse still, the U.S. use of the strait as an economic punitive measure could transform it into a geopolitical weapon that disrupts Chinese navigation and restricts its international trade movement, potentially prompting China to take countermeasures that threaten security and stability across the entire region<sup>[37]</sup>.

Instability in the Strait of Malacca poses a direct threat to global energy security, leading to increased transportation costs, oil price volatility, and supply chain disruptions, thus placing Asian markets—heavily dependent on energy imports through this passage—under severe challenges. Due to the lack of effective alternatives, any disruption in the strait is difficult to compensate for, forcing countries to seek alternative sources amid rising tensions and geopolitical competition<sup>[38]</sup>.

This discussion makes it clear that the South China Sea dispute goes beyond being a mere regional maritime boundary conflict; it has become a geopolitical issue with global security and economic dimensions. The complex interplay of major powers' interests and regional actors has made this dispute a pivotal point in the international balance of power. The potential repercussions, whether security-related or economic, foreshadow transformations that could

redraw the global order's map. Therefore, ensuring stability in this vital region requires a multilateral approach that considers the sensitivity of balances and prevents the area from sliding into confrontation.

### Conclusion and Findings

The South China Sea dispute represents a complex model of the interplay between geopolitics and the strategic interests of regional and major powers, making it one of the most prominent hotspots of tension in the contemporary world. The intertwining of geographical dimensions, economic resources, and military competition around this vital maritime passage has created a state of persistent instability. These disputes have escalated tensions between China and the United States, imposing new challenges on the rules of international law and freedom of navigation. In the absence of tangible and genuine diplomatic solutions, the South China Sea remains a key axis in the ongoing reshaping of the international order.

### Findings

1. The strategic geographic location of the South China Sea is a fundamental factor in the escalation of conflicts, given its control over global trade routes and the passage of massive amounts of energy supplies.
2. The overlapping interests of regional and international powers, foremost among them China and the United States, have transformed the dispute from a local conflict into a stage of global geopolitical contention.
3. The conflict has undermined regional security and increased the likelihood of military escalation, reflecting the fragility of regional balances in Asia and the Pacific.
4. The tensions have impacted the global economy by disrupting supply chains and threatening energy security, especially given the dependence of Asian markets on the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea.

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