

# **MS THESIS**

## **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY OF THE US**



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## **Table of Contents**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENT .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>DECLARATION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter-1 .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1. Background of the Study .....	4
1.2 Problem Statement .....	7
1.3 Significance of the Study .....	7
1.4 Objectives of the Study .....	7
1.5 Research Questions .....	8
1.6 Delimitation of the Study .....	8
<b>1.7 Literature Review .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.7.1. Review of Related Literature .....	9
1.7.2. Theoretical Framework .....	17
1.7.3. Applications of Neo-Realism .....	17
<b>1.8. Methodology .....</b>	<b>18</b>
1.8.1 Research Design.....	18
1.8.2. Population .....	19
1.8.3. Sampling and Data Collection Procedures .....	19
1.9. Instruments .....	19
1.10. Data Analysis .....	20
1.11. Study Organization.....	20
<b>Chapter -2 .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2. INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY IMPACT ON THE REGIONAL SECURITY .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>21</b>
2.2 Conflicting Claims in the South China Sea.....	25
<b>2.2.1 Exclusive Economic Zones in the South China Sea and China's Nine-Dash Line .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>2.2.2 China's Behavior in the South China Sea.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>2.3. China Growing Maritime Presence .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>2.3.1. Assertion of Rights to Resources .....</b>	<b>32</b>

2.4	Brute Force, Coercion, and Intimidation.....	33
2.4.1.	Diplomacy .....	34
2.4.2	Actions China Has Not(yet) Taken.....	35
2.4.3.	Factors that may Motivate China's Behavior .....	36
2.5.	Security.....	37
2.6.	Resources .....	39
2.7	National Identity.....	41
2.8.	Status .....	43
2.9.	US Interests in the South China Sea.....	45
2.9.1.	Security of Allies and Partners in the East Asia .....	47
2.9.2.	Rules Based order in The East Asia .....	48
2.9.3	South China Sea Islands and Military Bases.....	49
2.9.4.	Chinese Military Threats to U.S. Interests .....	50
2.9.5.	ABastion for Ballistic Missile Submarines .....	58
2.10	Chinese Threats to UNCLOS and Credibility.....	59
2.10.1	China's Interpretations of UNCLOS .....	60
2.10.3	US Credibility with Allies.....	65
2.10.4.	How Hard Should the United States Resist China? .....	67
2.10.5.	Deterring and Responding to China's Seizure of Features .....	69
2.10.6.	Deterring and Responding to China's Intimidation .....	72
2.10.7	Responding to China's Militarization of Features.....	73
2.10.8	Protecting the Navigational Riggts of US Navel Vessels .....	74
CHAPTER-3	3. ....CHALLENGES FOR REGIONAL SECURITY	80
3.1	Threat to the Sea Lanes of Communication:.....	80
3.2	Possibility of Limited or Full-Blown War: Escalation.....	84
3.3.	Challenges for Global Security .....	86
CHAPTER-4	4. ....CONCLUSION	98
5.	REFERENCES.....	107

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### FINAL APPROVAL

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## DECLARATION

I **Sajid Zaman, Reg No:257FSS/MSIR/F23** student of MS International Relations for the session 2023-2025, hereby declare that this MS Thesis entitled '*A Critical Analysis of the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US*' is 30,000 words in length including abbreviations, quotes, figures and references. This written document represents my own work and contains no materials that has been submitted and published previously in whole or in part, for an award of a degree in any other university, college and examining body of Pakistan or abroad.

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## List of Abbreviations

THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
PLA	People Liberation Army
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
PAC	Patriot Advanced Capability
WMD	Weapon of Mass Destruction
KMT	Kuomintang
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
AIT	American Institute in Taiwan
BB	Billion Barrel
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
UNCLOS	United Nation Convention on Law of Sea
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
FON	Freedom of Navigation
CVID	Complete Verifiable Irreversible Disarmament
NPR	Nuclear Posture Review
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles
SLBM	Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles
SLV	Space-Launch Vehicles
NNP	Nuclear Nonproliferation
ROK	Republic of Korea
PRC	People Republic of China
SCS	South China Sea
ECS	East China Sea
SLOC	Sea Lanes of Communication
FON	Freedom of Navigation
ACFT	AASEAN-China Free Trade Area
TCF	Trillion Cubic Feet
ICBM	Inter Continental Ballistic Missile
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
AIP	Air Independent Propulsion
AIZ	Air Identification Zone
EIA	Environmental Impact Assesment

## **ABSTRACT**

This study sets out to address the US China relationships that have been affecting the geopolitics of the 21st century. Nonetheless, despite the bumpy beginning, however, the Trump administration managed to establish a new national security strategy within the initial year of its tenure in power. The new US national security strategy uses the term strategic competitor directly and this particular nation is China which is the competitor that challenges American power, influence and interests, and it aims to undermine American prosperity and weaken American security. It was the first in history of the United States where it has defined the Indo-Pacific policy as a strategy of balancing and compensating the emerging power and influence of China on the states that share borders with the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. On the backdrop of the overall competitive policy of countering China, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo advocated the initiative of a new alliance of democracies in the international community against China. The Chinese government has not responded officially to US Indo-Pacific strategy or the need of free and open Indo-Pacific. Ten years later, when the Obama administration formulated the approach to the pivot to Asia, Beijing developed grand scale geo-economic policy assuming strengthening the Chinese economic impact on the traditional Silk Routes both overland and in the sea. How will Washington as a strategic threat emerge over the future in ten years' time in the sight of Beijing? In the present situation, Beijing has not been reciprocating the reciprocity against the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. The path trailed by China as a response to new challenge of the Americans has been different though less negative, less violent and aggressive. Beijing is desiring to reduce the national security threats and simultaneously expand its power in the Indo-Pacific region and globally. The Indo-Pacific region began to be strategic in terms of its significance since the beginning of the twenty-first century and that is when the term Indo-Pacific was born and gained the interest and debate in both academic and strategic circles.



## DECLARATION

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## **Chapter-1**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Indo-Pacific has become the focus of U.S. international relations in the Biden administration; and the People Republic of China was declared the biggest long-lasting strategic threat in the region and in the international community to the world. To support the American status as the leading world power, the administration has undertaken vigorous diplomatic actions, deployed military resources to the front and initiated the Indo-Pacific economic framework that aims to unify regional partners and external powers into a strategic location to ward off the Chinese advancement. Components of strategic, economic, and security fueling shift in the Asia-Pacific continue coming up under the Biden administration which is moving ahead with significant policy instruments. Nonetheless, implementing this strategy is quite hard due to issues such as competing world security interests, the lack of funding, and a lack of communication between allies and disparities in both domestic and foreign policy agendas. The actions have complicated a stable relationship between the U.S. and China, and thus competitiveness in the region is worsened as well (Guyer, 2022).

It is concerned with the fight of the geopolitical divide between liberal democratic ideals and the dictatorial form of governance. The Chinese Communist Party is interested in transforming the order in the region in order to enable the country to achieve its strategic achievements. It accomplishes this by the aggressive modernization in the military sector, promoting fake news, and economic statecraft making other nations act according to its designs. The U.S. department of defense sponsors a regional order that is

peaceful, prosperous, and adhering to international regulations. It does not encourage activities that jeopardize sovereignty and stability of nations in the Indo-Pacific. Notably, liberal international order has benefited China immensely and has helped to take hundreds of people million out of poverty. But its recent course demonstrates that it desires to exploit the same system and challenged its very essence (U.S. Department of Defense, 1995).

During the early twenty-first century, Indo-Pacific region has come into focus as the point of worldwide geopolitics. The United States and China are two key players that are escalating their activities in strategic maritime lines, in regional organizations and in international fora. Concomitantly, Australia and New Zealand, which have long been acting as significant players, are adjusting roles, especially regarding trade and security, which has implications on the island economies making them vulnerable to external forces headed by Beijing. The United States has codified the Indo-Asia Pacific Strategy to protect its strategic and political interests and be in equilibrium with other allies like India and Japan. At the same time, Beijing is trying to limit the scope of its geopolitical influence stretching as far as the Indian Ocean to Western Pacific as the strategy of Indo-Pacific gathers momentum.

Nevertheless, this geopolitical formation is not final. An expanded concept of security has led to an understanding of the environment of security degradation, cybersecurity, transnational crime, and human security, which remains a view postulated by more Pacific Island states. The evolvement makes the traditional binary discourse of great-power competition, as stated by both scholars and policymakers, more complex.

The Sino-American competition is escalating wherein a global stage is gradually emerging as the Indo-Pacific, especially Southeast Asia has become the grand theatre of strategic rivalry. Different powers have different comparative advantages: Beijing mobilizes its impressive economic levers as well as diplomatic activity, and Washington has at its disposal a diversified set of military, economic and normative resources. Though the U.S. presence has been drastically enhanced by the Obama administration under the policy of Pivot to Asia, the regional influence has also been greatly extended by China, whose impact can be seen in the deeper integration with the economic systems and regional organizations. Although the prevailing regional discourse indicates that Beijing is the rising power taking the lead, empirical estimations indicate that the U.S. still holds deep resources of military reach, alliance system, and standards of authority. This is because the power balance is not fixed and time-worn but the commitment of a multidimensional approach by the U.S has to be sustained to deal with Chinese aggressiveness. Notably, this competition has not developed a zero-sum level. Thereby, Washington and Beijing need to focus on mastering strategic tensions, handling antagonism, and achieving a modus vivendi of adversarial coexistence, which is essential to the stability of the region and the order within the international environment and as a whole (The White House, 2021).

### **1.1. Background of the Study**

In February 2022, the Biden administration made an official announcement of the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States. Such is the strategy of the United States in the Indo-Pacific (White House, 2022). It reveals the reality that the United States is a hub of power in Indo-Pacific and the fact that America can never be secure and prosperous in

the same breath without the Indo-Pacific region. As illustrated in the document, the United States has linkages to the region dating back to two centuries or so and that it has to uphold its security guarantees to the partners, but also its own strategic interests in ensuring that its near-peer competitor does not emerge even with its massive financial investments in the region (White House, 2022). This interpretation implies that the Indo-Pacific is increasingly experiencing increased threats and those that are emanating by China. PRC is also commercially exploiting its economy, politics, military and technologies exerting the application of those powers to attain sphere of influence in Indo-Pacific and to become the global state leading power (White House, 2022).

One of the measures that the country is undertaking to safeguard its economic positions in the region against the impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative by China is the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) (Huang & Smith, 2022). At the same time, it plans to expand its army and ensure strategic U.S. dominance with the help of such principles as integrated deterrence (Austin, 2022). Regional governance is aimed at increasing the capacity of the region to respond to global issues like climate change, clean energy transition, and a pandemic like the COVID-19 by enhancing further global cooperation and investment. Moreover, the strategy envisages the further development of military partnerships with Asia-Pacific regional partners, the creation of small and flexible multilateral coalitions that address particular regional issues, the strengthening of U.S. leadership, and the possibility of combining efforts and addressing challenges of China together (White House, 2022).

Nonetheless, whereas Trump was focused on unilateral strategies and militarized vision of America First policy, Biden has introduced the reliance on the interdependence between economic and security issues and promotes multilateral collaborations (Campbell & Doshi, 2021). In addition, the strategy indicates an apparent shift in the direction of collaborative diplomacy. In contrast to its predecessor, the Biden administration is focusing more on alliances and partnership with Japan, Australia, India, and ASEAN, in particular. Under regimes such as the Quad and AUKUS, the United States seeks to establish a web of allies it trusts in case of China increasing its influence regionally (Medeiros, 2022). The kind of multilateralism points out that Washington understands that no single power can overcome the complex challenges facing the region and that is, the security challenges facing the sea, cyber-security, the supply chain, and infrastructure development.

Besides, the Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizes the role of soft power and diplomacy. To strengthen democratic values and good governance in the region, the United States is escalating its education, technological, and cultural investment in diplomacy (Nye, 2021). They are implementing development aid, civil society support, and digital infrastructure interventions, using them as tools to increase transparency, equity, and sustainability. The U.S. is using its strategy of promoting inclusive growth and providing an alternative to the Chinese economic system that has often been criticized as exploitative or even debt-creating to win hearts and minds and strengthen an internationally order based on a set of rules (Green & Shearer, 2022). The United States wants to make sure of a stable, prosperous, democratic Indo-Pacific future based on the

balance of hard and soft power such as bringing on board Indo-Pacific neighbors with this new style of hybrid integrated power approach towards the Indo-Pacific region.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

When U.S. relations with China are in a state of strategic competition, the adoption of Indo-Pacific Strategy presents various challenges and opportunities to the geopolitical order in the eastern Asian region. The study will focus on how this approach would affect the security in the region, economic ties, and diplomacy in East Asia.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

- Fellow colleagues, I would urge all of you to discuss the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as a single geostrategic entity: they are becoming more strategic in terms of their strategic relevance.
- The use of the term Indo-Pacific came out as a deliberate maneuver and was given momentum by a vision that was put forward by Shinzo Abe of an open and prosperous seas, a rhetoric that would later be used by the United States in their strands.
- The most significant part of the current analysis is the argument that the Indo-Pacific is critical to the national security of the United States especially in checkmating the influence of Beijing.

## **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

- To analyse the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2022 and its strategic underpinnings for regional security.
- To examine the implications of the US Indo pacific strategy for regional security.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

- What are basic tenets of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2022 ?
- How the US Indo-Pacific strategy will impact on the regional security ?

## **1.6 Delimitation of the Study**

This study is qualitative in nature and will be relying upon primary sources of data collection i.e. Face to Face Interviews, Online Interviews, and Interviews through emails from diplomats, high ranked military officers, scholars having expertise on the subject, and others officials from East Asia and Southeast Asia; and secondary sources i.e. books, journals, published and online archived reports related to Indo-Pacific and Asia Pacific studies.



## **1.7 Literature Review**

This section will provide a platform for assessing the existing literature on the U.S. influence in the Indo Strategic culture in the modern times and the impacts posed against China due to this mindset. It will help in identifying the existing contributions in the literature and also finds out various gaps in this specific arena. An account of literature review has been presented as under.

### **1.7.1. Review of Related Literature**

The old Asia-Pacific itself is quite not described by the term in its geographical locating, the Indo-Pacific is depicted as the concept of the territory on the border of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The point is however that it is a concept of the totality of operation. The concept does actually justify the fact that the two maritime regions will be more strategically connected with the concept of unity in operation and the mechanism of security. It notes that with the likely futures of great power competition, this vast ocean expanse is where it is most likely to happen, as compared to more conventional competitors in the land-masses. The Indo-incorporation would imply that, India is actually emerging to be more strategic both in regional and in international phenomenon, as well as more forceful in geostrategic sense (Christopher S. Chivis).

In the United States, institutionalization of this political goal was incarnated. In June 2019, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report was posted by the Department of Defense. In the paper, it was highlighted that the greatest threat that tested national security of the U.S. in the form of inter-state strategic rivalry based on the geopolitical rivalry between the principles of a free and oppressive world order. It described how Washington was

aiming at the achievement of the regional goals with its military readiness, its hardening of the partners and its building up a powerful and integrated regional Order. The initial government authored writing to record the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy is a framework provided by the Pentagon regarding how to prevent the occurrence of the great power conflict and how to sustain the security of the region in the event of peace time. The significant structure developed in the Trump government was enhanced by the Biden government that was polished to a larger extent. The Presidential Announcement of the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy made in February 2022 highlighted the American massive involvement in the Indo-Pacific not only in the Northeast and Southeast of Asia, South Asia and the Pacific Islands, but also spelled out the objectives and measures to be implemented in each of the sub-regions. The very fact that the existing government keeps perpetuating and expanding the Indo-Pacific Strategy leaves no doubt that it is the central core of the US geostrategy in the region (Rosemary Foot).

The interaction of the relationship between United States and Australia satisfies the assertion that the local politics of the US contributed minimally to the US foreign policy and the current assessment of Chinese menace. The Trump presidency has meant the alliance is once more a priority, with Canberra holding far more skepticism over the wisdom of entrusting so much to a more erratic United States. This came in the year 2017 when Australia agreed to resuscitate the Quad (with India, Japan, and the United States) in an effort to develop a concerted approach on the revisionist actions that have been taking place in the region by China. Later on Canberra fell into line with the US Indo-Pacific policy. Australia and China issues were equally increasing in the bilateral sphere between the two states, and thus; Australian citizens and politicians required a broad

strategic review, which occurred in 2020 and revealed that, to be precise, China posed the greatest security concern to Australia. The Biden administration has strengthened the same in 2021 when it formed the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) security alliance. Mainly the AUKUS embark will focus on the coordination of development of nuclear-powered submarines, and a lot of security cooperation can be rolled into that, such as the basing model as well as seeking out common R&D to pursue advanced quantum computing and hypersonics.

The many discussions between Biden and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in the recent past had both leaders professing their immense satisfaction in the current strengths of the alliance that had been always been strong in territory of shared values as well as synchronized ambitions including the efforts to resist China. White house 2023 claimed that it used to have a friendship with Australia that is an alliance of our times, and the same case applies to Japan. Trump and the late former Japanese prime minister, Abe Shinzo had developed a strong personal rapport and this friendship was not dented even after Trump took the pragmatic decision to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral trade agreement that Japan is a signatory to and went on to publicly make speculative remarks about alteration to the relations between Japan and the U.S. The two officers, Eric Sager and Xavier Jaravel retained their focus on China.

Shinzo Abe obviously had an influence over Trump because he changed the direction where he set his eyes on Indo-Pacific which encompassed India and Indian Ocean Region in an orderly way of combating China. Japan was one of the biggest proponents of revival of the Quad. These steps were taken by Tokyo government in

answer to the dread of the ongoing stagnation in the dispute over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea which is also claimed by China and known as the Diaoyu Island during the Trump presidency. In 2017, Japan was worried about North Korea which conducted its tests of ballistic missiles over its territory. Japan has also realigned its efforts with the advent of Biden in office in relation to Taiwan Strait. Tokyo claims that confrontation in the region would negatively affect its security of its chain of islands to the southwest referred to as Ryukyu Islands. It is more intertwined than ever before between Tokyo and Washington at least in the area of command and control, defence industrial production and maintenance. But Tokyo does complain. It is in search of additional community security system that would grant second back up security plan. The new Prime Minister, Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru has encouraged the designation of what would be termed as an Asian NATO. In an informal discussion, the Biden government has already stated that it has ruled out the concept, but such may be considered by a future government (Abe, 2021).

Some countries are increasingly opposed to the economic, political and military ascendancy of China in the Indo Pacific with the United States, India, Japan and Australia as their critics. The region has gained center-stage since this is of geopolitical and strategic importance. Many nations are currently geared towards changing their strategic choices and formulation of some policies towards the Indo-Pacific without much understanding of the implications of this approach towards their partners. A clear understanding of what is or is not disclosed through perception is of instrumental value to ensure that the impact of cooperation to its fullest will be achieved. It fosters cooperation, coordination and collaboration amongst nations which have same intentions

as they handle or tackle differences. The paper presents a lot of field research conducted in the seven countries, i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, France, India, Tonga, Japan, and China, prior to the extensive political and economic consequences of COVID-19. At that time, six countries (excluding China) were in mess, uncertainties, and disorganization regarding their relationship with China. In most cases, the balance was between the internal and the political economic sectors were more than ready to swing themselves whereas the defense and security sectors and the intelligence sectors were the most circumspect with regard to any kind of engagements. Domestic uncertainty level was also on the high due to the primary reasons that were Brexit or elections. This had a tendency to bring about hedging. The domestic imbalances among most countries narrowed with the introduction of COVID-19, global recession that appeared in the economy, and the Chinese expansionism. Among them, the problems concerning China had been discussed, which contributed to the increased readiness to combat its influence. It is a change that has intensified the urge to pursue new international relations beyond Chinese influence such as to economic ventures like India-Japan-Australian supply-chain resilience initiative and a revitalized Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (C. Fred Bergsten).

With the expansionism reaching deep into the Western Pacific by the Chinese the US had managed to formulate the Indo-Pacific policy in relation to the US geopolitical and foreign policy interests of the US especially with the assistance of its strategic partners such as India and Japan. This has triggered the leaders of the Pacific Islands to campaign a broader variation of regional security that includes human security,

environmental, resource security, transnational crime, and cybersecurity (Andrew KP Leung).

In the analysis of the Japan nuclear discourse, Yuki Tatsumi (2024) stated that the Japanese nuclear discourse has been challenged on a regular basis since the middle of the 1990s as Japan feels threatened by its three nuclear powers; China, North Korea and Russia. Its risks that have been taking acute dimensions of late attributed to the recent upsurge in the number of missile tests it carries out and the advancement of its nuclear program are the biggest immediate risk facing it. This has rekindled the Chinese threats perceived by Japan in the past ten years as they have observed the power amplification of the atomic and military warfare as well as the aggressions towards the East and South China Ocean by Beijing. The recent tension between the two countries Russia and Ukraine has even fueled the fears of Japan with regard to the nuclear threats. The recent scenario aggravated by a backdrop of sovereignty dilemma abracadabra between Japan and Russia over the Northern Territories where apparently Russia is posed to use the nuclear blackmail card to intimidate Ukraine and other global relationships has catalyzed Japan to assess the implications of such nuclear blackmailing to East Asia and Japanese domestic security by China or North Korea or Russia. The controversy surrounding the nuclear option of Japan is also raised once again because there is a hint of possibly indulging in nuclear sharing and deployment of nuclear weapons, particularly the US under the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. One of the statements by Abe is that Japan ought to think of sharing nuclear weapons with United States just as some of the countries that constitute NATO since without their membership the Ukraine attack would never have actually happened. This has been supported by other dominant leaders in the

Japanese civilian and military leadership in the history. Such a contentious discussion presupposes the shift in the Japanese defense policy. In the instance when the greatest contributing factor to the revisions carried out by Tokyo on its three national policy documents on security published in the previous month of December 2022, i.e., the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program, the case in Ukraine would be the factor that instigated the referred revisions. The context through which these articles became landmark was the fact that there has been a serious degree of urgency on the part of Japan to deal with the security environment of the country in the past decade. The liberal, free and stable international system that was broad since the fall of the cold war is facing acute challenges to the point whereby Japan regards China as unprecedented and largest strategic threat to their peace and security. As a result of the acquisition, Japan declared that it will expand its military expenditure by nearly 65 percent or nearly 6.4 trillion yen between 2022 (FY) and 2027 (FY), to 8.9 trillion yen. Taiwan and Cross Strait: STIMSON Centre (2021) Although, nowadays, it is possible to witness the peaceful relations in the Taiwan Strait, yet, the latent conflict exists, and there is no other regional or global problem with such likelihood of a collision and, therefore, its transformation into the power conflict that will take the significant capacity or potential of the power conflict. The Taiwan and Cross-Strait Relations project aims at getting acquainted with what both parties want and instilling realization in their minds to ease the peace in the distant future and not leading to a likely end hence a probable impending doom. Reflecting upon the conducted analysis, the paper comprises a profound overview of the drift towards Strait relations and US involvement, and overview of the dynamic political path in Taiwan and its

economy and dilemma of security. The Taiwan and Cross-Strait Relations initiative unravels the situation and provides the policy options that can be exploited by the U.S. and the two cross-Strait organizations (STIMSON, 2021).

According to what is stated in South Asia Research: Geo-Politics of South Asia (2022), the great power struggle re-appeared in the Indo-Pacific region and thus this presence has become a key interaction zone. The increasing ability and presence that China is making in Indo-Pacific is also posing a challenge to US strategy in the region in a very drastic manner and to the very question of genuineness and good health of the US-India relationship. The hottest topic of the paper is how the US, allies, and Indo-Pacific partners could effectively act against the emergence of great powers in Asia, as well as breakthroughs in technology that can lead to the reshaping of the offence-defence balance of the region (CAP China Working Group on Technology).

China in retaliation turns around viciously. Taiwan has been caught between the two by China in spite of the tedious work of a measured pragmatic leadership in Taiwan. In relations to the Chinese invasion of Taiwan, it is American thinkers who have taken the fight to the Joseph Biden administration to take the unequivocal stand on whether to defend Taiwan or lead it to the Chinese domination. Modification and toughness of the American policy of deterrence of dual deterrence should be undertaken by the United States to discretionally enhance the role of its military power as well as actively enhance the Taiwan security in all areas including towards the bilateral economic agreement directed towards the bilateral economic agreement. There needs to be subtle but



overriding messages to China in concert with Taipei, that we are honoring our commitments given to China since 1971.

### **1.7.2. Theoretical Framework**

Neo-realism is a type of classical realism that is a system level theory. It says everything that traditional realism says. It does, however, think that the reason for all the power conflicts and rivalries is not the character of nations, but the nature of the international system (anarchy). States are on their own. There is no government in the world, no one who looks out for states, and regulations that are easy to break. Anarchy rules the planet, and states do what they have to do to stay safe and grab more power. Power makes people compete with one other because it is intimidating by its very nature. If another state is stronger than yours, the only option to protect yourself is to fight back or attack your enemy first. A neo-realist might suggest that the cold war happened because there were only two strong countries left after World War II. The competition turned into the Cold War because there was no world authority or standards of behavior to keep it in check.

### **1.7.3. Applications of Neo-Realism**

As study adopts the Neo-Realism framework, which explains state behavior in an anarchic international system characterized by power struggles and strategic balancing. According to this view of international Relations, the international system is anarchic since there is no central power to regulate the acts and actions of the states. This is why nations are the primary players in the international system, and they will do whatever is

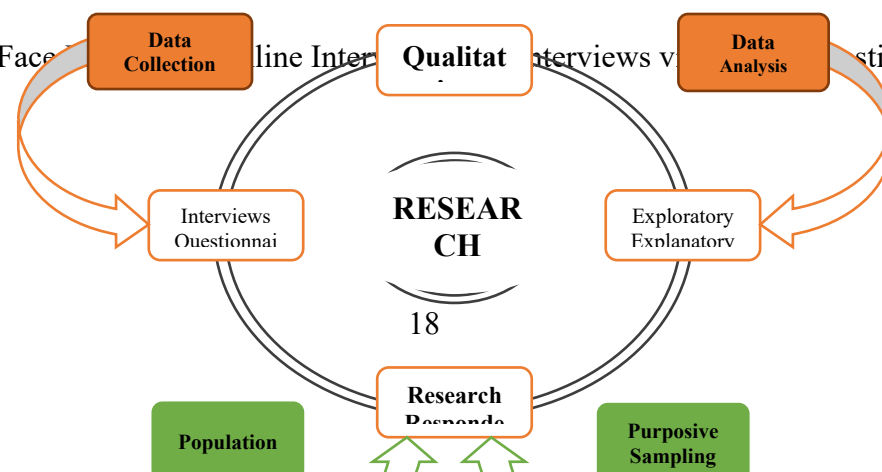
best for their national interests without regard for the advantages and costs of others. In the international arena, there is a self-help situation in which powerful governments are constantly eager to gain an advantage over weaker ones. The successful state would be the one that increases its strength by challenging the world superpower's hegemonic status (Ratner 2018).

For decades, the United States has been the most powerful and influential state, controlling the world's economic and political systems. While China's regional hegemony and influential status has freed them to travel and concentrate on other parts of the world, this might pose a threat to the United States. Because China has nuclear capabilities, the United States will be limited in its ability to respond. As a result, the United States prefers a situation in which China is concerned about its neighbours and focuses on Asia rather than other parts of the world, so they will oppose China's efforts and take a more competitive approach toward China (Ratner, 2018)

## 1.8. Methodology

### 1.8.1 Research Design

This research is qualitative in nature and will adopt qualitative research design and qualifies in the exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive research methods. In order to elaborate various characteristics of the research, both primary and secondary data will be collected. This study will be relying upon primary sources of data collection methods i.e. Face to Face (Interviews and Questionnaire), Online Interviews (Qualitative Interviews and Data Analysis).



## **Figure 2.2 Research Design**

### **1.8.2. Population**

This research aims to collect primary data from 50 respondents through in-depth interviews from retired military officers, retired diplomats, Professors and scholars from India and Pakistan having expertise on the subject. Various international experts and scholars will also be approached for an alternative and neutral perspective on the issue under consideration.

### **1.8.3. Sampling and Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection procedure will be secondary sources i.e. books, journals, published and online archived reports related to Indo-Pacific Strategy and Asia-Pacific Order.

## **1.9. Instruments**

This study will be relying upon secondary sources of data collection method i.e. secondary sources i.e. books, journals, published and online archived reports related to Indo-Pacific Strategy and Asia-Pacific Order.

### **1.10. Data Analysis**

The qualitative data collected through secondary sources will be analyzed through “Discourse Analysis” as it focuses on researching the underlying meanings and developing relationships among the information and its context.

### **1.11. Study Organization**

**Chapter-1:** Introduction

**Chapter-2:** Analysis of the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US

**Chapter-3:** Indo-Pacific strategy impacts on the regional security

**Chapter-4:** Challenges for Regional Security

**Chapter-5:** Conclusion Finding and Discussion

## **Chapter -2**

### **2. INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY IMPACT ON THE REGIONAL SECURITY**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The evolving strategic landscape in the South China Sea presents the United States with a spectrum of policy choices, ranging from intensified resistance to China's assertive maritime behavior to partial strategic retrenchment. The current U.S. posture falls between these two poles, reflecting a carefully calibrated balance. China's activities—ranging from militarization of artificial islands to the harassment of foreign vessels—pose a persistent, albeit measured, challenge to U.S. strategic interests in the region. Given the limited nature of these interests and the calculated caution characterizing Beijing's incremental assertiveness, a drastic escalation in U.S. resistance is presently unwarranted. However, should China exhibit heightened resolve to dominate the region, the United States may be compelled to consider a policy of partial withdrawal, refraining from direct military opposition while preserving freedom of navigation and regional commitments.

The South China Sea has transitioned from a domain of minor territorial disputes to a flashpoint of geostrategic significance. Historically characterized by competing claims over marginal islands and reefs, recent developments—particularly since 2008—indicate a substantial shift in China's approach. Its consolidation of control over the Scarborough Shoal, expansion of artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago, construction of military installations, and disregard for the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling rejecting its "nine-dash line" claims, collectively signal an ambition to exert control over a vital global

maritime corridor. This assertiveness has included coercive actions against vessels from neighboring countries operating within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), fundamentally reshaping regional security perceptions.

These developments have had profound implications for U.S. strategic assessments. Where once the bilateral relationship with China was framed predominantly in cooperative terms, the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy now identifies Beijing as a revisionist power seeking to carve out a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to challenge the existing international order. The intensification of Chinese maritime aggression, particularly in the South China Sea, has catalyzed a reassessment within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Influential scholars and policymakers, including Ely Ratner, have warned of a significant shift in the regional balance of power should China succeed in consolidating its maritime claims—an outcome that would undermine U.S. strategic primacy in Asia.

The South China Sea is increasingly perceived as a potential locus of major-power conflict. While a high-intensity confrontation remains more likely over Taiwan, the possibility of escalation in the South China Sea—arising from incidents involving maritime assets or contested territorial claims—cannot be discounted. Analysts have raised concerns that localized crises could spiral into conventional conflict, or even trigger nuclear escalation. As China rises, the United States must rigorously reassess its strategic posture: determining whether to recalibrate its commitments toward a more confrontational posture, or, where its interests are less vital, to strategically retrench in order to mitigate the risk of war.

Our analysis is anchored in the assumption that the United States continues to adhere to its prevailing grand strategy, which identifies East Asian treaty allies—Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—as integral to its national security framework. Within this strategic context, the South China Sea is evaluated as a subordinate theater of interest. Accordingly, we assess a continuum of policy responses available to Washington, including heightened military resistance, a policy of partial retrenchment, and maintenance of the status quo. The first scenario would entail a pronounced military commitment to counter Chinese attempts to control maritime features, disrupt commerce, or challenge U.S. surveillance and operational freedom—potentially including the preemptive use of force.

Alternatively, under a partial retrenchment strategy, the United States would refrain from employing military force to defend the territorial claims or maritime entitlements of regional states, even while retaining the capacity to do so. China’s growing military capabilities afford it regional coercive advantages, and under this model, the U.S. would prioritize defense of formal allies while preserving wartime operational capabilities in the South China Sea. The U.S. would continue conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), utilize economic and diplomatic tools to contest China’s claims, and accept a limited Chinese sphere of influence—short of regional hegemonywhile maintaining the necessary deterrent capacity to uphold vital interests.

The prevailing U.S. strategy occupies a median position along this spectrum. Washington maintains neutrality regarding sovereignty over specific maritime features

but has responded to certain provocations, such as potential Chinese control over Scarborough Shoal, with firm signaling of potential military consequences. While abstaining from defending other states' resource claims with force, the U.S. has reinforced its legal stance through FONOPs grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), expanded aerial and naval operations in contested zones, and imposed sanctions on entities facilitating Chinese expansionism. These actions aim to preserve navigational freedoms and deter coercive behavior without provoking open conflict.

Our assessment concludes that the current U.S. approach is strategically optimal given existing conditions. Escalating military resistance would incur disproportionate risks in light of America's limited security stakes in the South China Sea. Conversely, a premature retreat would undermine U.S. credibility and signal acquiescence to China's growing regional assertiveness. At present, the measured level of resistance allows the United States to contest China's behavior, reinforce its regional standing, and deter further encroachment while minimizing the risk of high-intensity conflict. Nevertheless, this equilibrium must be constantly reevaluated in response to China's evolving posture.

Should Beijing signal an increased willingness to bear higher costs in pursuit of maritime control, a shift toward partial retrenchment may become strategically prudent. In such a scenario, the United States would likely withdraw its military opposition to China's claims in the South China Sea while maintaining freedom of navigation commitments and ensuring the defense of key allies. This approach would recognize the



growing asymmetry of interests and capabilities in the region and acknowledge the emerging reality of a constrained Chinese sphere of influence. Importantly, such a policy would seek to safeguard regional balance without overcommitting U.S. resources to peripheral disputes.

Our study proceeds by analyzing China's maritime claims and assertive conduct over the past decade, followed by an examination of the strategic drivers underpinning Beijing's policies. We then assess U.S. interests in the region in light of its broader grand strategy and identify the specific threats that China's South China Sea policy poses to those interests. Contrary to dominant narratives, we argue that these threats are limited in both scope and intensity. In the final sections, we explore existing and alternative U.S. policy options to evaluate the most appropriate level of engagement—now and into the future—in one of the Indo-Pacific's most contested maritime theaters.

## **2.2 Conflicting Claims in the South China Sea**

The second element of the South China Sea disputes includes the litigation of national ownership of the maritime territories. The Law of the Sea came into practice as a United Nations Convention on Law the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982 but went forward into force in 1994 creating a legally binding framework with respect to maritime entitlements which governs disputes (UNCLOS, 1982). It gives particular maritime zones and rights to which coastal states can claim, including territorial seas, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and outer continental shelves.

Fellow workers, we have to start by recognizing the territorial sea which is a 12 nautical mile line gauged along the baselines of a state. Within this limit (with the addition, on our part, of our own novel contractions of territorial and sea,) we have returned to the original Latin, because the sovereignty not only covers the water column but also the subsoil and the airspace. With this presence of other foreign vessels (not interfering with the peace, good order, or security) such sovereignty is not qualified. Moving out further, there is the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) which provides a further 200 nautical miles and which this time is measured off the baseline. Within the EEZ, freedom of navigation and overflight of all states applies; when it comes to coastal states, they exclusively obtain the rights to exploit the resources, carry out exploration and investigation, and protect the marine environment.

Examples are now to be found in the Spratly Islands. Some of the claimant states such as China argue that low-tide elevation and rocks allow them to own territorial seas and extended continental-shelves. It is made clear in article 121 paragraph two of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) that such features are not islands and consequently they do not generate EEZs unless they are of human habit and/or sustain an economic life. The Philippines won its case against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016, because, according to them, not a single Spratly is an island and, as a result, cannot provide them with an EEZ. The tribunal also denied the historic rights assertion by China in the nine-dash line as it stated such right is not in line with UNCLOS.

China, nevertheless, insists on its sovereignty in the territorial sea, EEZ, and continental shelf around several aspects of land in the South China Sea and refers to historical use and imprecise arguments on having centuries of portrayed fishing rights (Zhao, 2018). Disputed maritime claims by China explicitly contradict the maritime rights of the other coastal nations composed of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia as their EEZs overlap with territories subdivided by the Chinese nine-dash line (Storey, 2017). Moreover, China holds foreign military ships should seek prior approval to transiting sailing within its claimed waters, an argument dismissed by the United States that upholds the so-called principle of freedom of navigation as stipulated in international law.

Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) have been taking place in the South China Sea since 2015 following United States challenges to what it deems excessive maritime claims by China, such as denials of innocent passage and military operations in exclusive economic zones (EEZs), (O'Rourke, 2023). China suggests that the U.S. intelligence gathering operations off the Chinese shores contravene prohibitions on the peaceful use of the seas and the cultural rights of coastal states to oversee scientific research in their extended economic zones (Zhao, 2018). The lawful distinction provides the point of friction and serves as one of the aspects of a greater strategic conflict in the Indo-Pacific maritime region between the Chinese and the Americans.

### **2.2.1 Exclusive Economic Zones in the South China Sea and China's Nine-Dash Line**

The first essential interest of the EEZ map involves critical attachments to the conventions that control the framework of delimiting maritime boundaries. Under Article 74 of the UNCLOS a 200-nautical-mile baseline is required within which the EEZ is measured, but the map itself acknowledges that this line can be altered by treaty. We scholars must then ask questions, and I will here begin with asking questions of the treaties which change this principle, and those at least which are referred to in the map. The map does not cover EEZ claims to disputed areas, e.g. the Paracel Islands. In line with this, maritime boundary illustrated where distance between two states is within 400 nautical miles is either a treaty or agreement line between two states or a haphazardly drawn median between two states. The map also gives us information that the particular EEZ of China encompasses the entire EEZ of Taiwan thus seemingly putting the two jurisdictions in direct collision.

Third, the United States does not agree with the use of straight baselines by China which is used to mark internal seas on the inland side. China has relied on straight baselines, in order to have a considerable part of the Paracel domestic seas, so that it can exclude foreign ships. According to unofficial sources, China will consider the Spratly Islands as single territory, hence allowing it to add to its waters extensive internal waters to discourage intrusion by foreign ships, and vastly increased territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZs).

Lastly, it remains to be uncertain the extent and specific details of the historical rights that China claims along the nine-dash line and specifically with regards to navigation. This could be the greatest dispute between the two countries because the U.S navy ships are transversing and practicing within the south china sea due to various reasons.

### **2.2.2 China's Behavior in the South China Sea**

The activities raise universal international criticism because the region is strategically vital to international trade and the available hydrocarbon reserves and fish resources (O'Rourke, 2023). The actions of China have not simply been limited to physical ones, however, and this includes the process of utilizing gray-zone tactics, such as deploying its coast guard and maritime militia to bully other claimants and establish control over disputed waters without sparking an open conflict (Zhao, 2018). At the same time, China has been deploying diplomacy and economics to defuse the resistance and ensure there is no cohesive response within the region (Storey, 2017).

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) decided that the maritime boundary claims by China, especially those based on historical rights as contained in the nine-dash line were invalid in the light of UNCLOS. The tribunal ruled that the occupied features of China in Spratly Islands were incapable of producing EEZs and continental shelves and that China has had severe environmental damage due to their construction acts on these islands (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). Nevertheless, despite this ruling, China has declined to acknowledge or carry out the ruling of the PCA, thus

defeating the attempts to generate a solution to legal resolution as well as increasing regional insecurity (Zhang, 2021).

The latest academic literature records, with growing regularity, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and more broadly, the regional maritime patrols of the United States and other maritime powers in waters off the region. Such twists and turns validate the recent strategic competition that exists in the Indo-Pacific, where Chinese aggressive behavior and failure to comply with any rule of law has remained critical contributors to regional instability and enhancing geopolitical tensions.

### **2.3. China Growing Maritime Presence**

China has engaged in a wide modernization of the forces, including the maritime, in its overall plan to claim territories within the South China Sea. The most fundamental feature of this move is the enhancement of the People Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), especially the South Sea Fleet with a major boost being witnessed on the surface warships and underwater force. At present, China has also been on a high-intensity military build up program regarding high-end platforms in the navy consisting of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), nuclear powered and diesel-electric attack submarines, and modern surface units of destroyers, frigates, and corvettes (Erickson & Goldstein, 2009). The destroyer type ships, a lot of which were commissioned in the last ten years, speak to the increasing importance of power projection and regional sea control of PLAN (Office of Naval Intelligence, 2020).

The same level of assertiveness is applied to the China Coast Guard (CCG) which is now believed to be the largest coast guard force in Asia or indeed the world with

over 200 vessels in service (Mastro, 2019). The CCG has the active role in enforcing Chinese claims through carrying out seismic surveys and in the enforcement seasonal fishing bans, the blockade of contested features by other claimants and the escort of Chinese fishing fleets into disputed waters. Such non-military, but coercive actions also enable China to wield its influence upon regional disputes without missing plausible deniability.

Besides, both the PLAN and the CCG are supplemented by the Maritime Militia, which is a poorly trained maritime force made up of civilian fishermen and mobilized and trained by the state. These forces frequently find themselves in gray-zone environments-- low-level conflicts, not quite amounting to an armed conflict. Among them, there is the harassment of USS Impeccable in 2009 and further existence of Chinese militia activity around Thitu Island, claimed by the Philippines, come to prominence (Poling, 2020). The Maritime Militia is not clearly defined as an ensemble of forces and therefore the international responses are complicated and improves possibilities of escalation of tensions by China without using traditional military.

The final component about the presence of China in the sea is the seven bases, restaurants located on the rocks which are under the responsibility of China in the Spratly Islands. In a ambitious land reclamation program in the Spratly Islands, China has turned Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi reefs into forward operating bases featuring runways, hardened hangars capable of storing fighters, hardened shelters able to accommodate anti-air and anti-ship missiles, radar, communications-port equipment and harbor facilities consisting of approximately 4 feet of sand accretion. This paper

analyzes, accordingly, the value of bases in times of war. The prospective peacetime worth of such stations is also immense as they can be used to carry a protruding statement of the CCG and the marine militia as well as fishing craft around the southern part of the South China sea.

### **2.3.1. Assertion of Rights to Resources**

China has largely aimed to establish sovereignty over South China Sea through claiming rights over its resources. China has often claimed that it acts in self-defence after being provoked by other states who either challenge or do not respect its sovereignty claims. Either reactionary or not, the responses given by China are either more than enough or not enough, which contributes to tensions over the last ten years. China claims to have the right to exploit the resources in the Exclusive Economic Zone of neighbouring countries along the nine-dash line. China has threatened since the early 2000s that the international oil firms that conduct exploration activities in Vietnam waters will not be allowed to sell their products in China. It also released blocks to develop that seemingly fell with the Vietnam Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In 2014, China dispatched the drilling equipment to drill between two Vietnamese blocks. Vietnam tried to resist the rig drilling which involved confrontation between the coast guard vessels of both parties.

Adding to this, China has made it possible to fish in the coastal waters of other nations in the EEZ. Following this event, China imposed its one-sided fishing ban on the south China Sea above the 12 degrees north in 1999. There are conventional fishing grounds by littoral states in this area. China and Indonesia have engaged in numerous



standoffs since 2016 as Chinese fishing vessels enter the EEZ of Indonesia in the area of the Natuna Islands due to the crossing of the nine-dash line over the EEZ.

## **2.4 Brute Force, Coercion, and Intimidation**

The marine expansion makes China intimidate other actors and nations. This was most vividly witnessed in Scarborough Shoal, 2012 when Philippines attempted to capture Chinese fishermen within the fishing grounds of the reef. A stand off followed and the fact that it controlled the entrance to the reef and the waters around it became a point of importance. After breaking an agreement to surrender collectively in conjunction, China wound up claiming overall control of the geographical features.

In other regions, Beijing has also attempted to harass and intimidate the other nations about their claims of critical waterspaces using China Coast Guard (CCG) and maritime militia with feeble routine flyovers. The two shoals that the forces have been continuously focusing on since 2013 have been the Second Thomas Shoal that the Philippines manages where Chinese ships have occasionally obstructed Philippine supplies of provisions to marines occupying the top of the feature; and South Luconia Shoals within Malaysian EEZ to complicate Malaysian oil and gas operations. In the year 2018, the ships of the Beijing have also been circling the Thitu Island, the biggest Island in the Spratly which is under the possession of the Philippines to monitor the building activity. These are expected to reinforce the arguments of China and foreclosure of positions staked out by the other claimants.

Another reason China would want to deter the air and naval forces of the United States is based on the premise of Pelops. The cases of encountering each-other are

normally blamed on various differences in military surveillance to that of China EEZ. The 2009 incident concerning the PLAN, law-enforcement and auxiliary vessels intercepting the USS Impeccable is a textbook example of Beijing trying to protest what China feels is a rising American surveillance. The United States has also cited frequent intersections by the Chinese military airplanes of the spy planes of the United States as being unsafe. Chinese ships used to shadow the U.S. forces on missions in freedom-of-navigation, but they rarely intervene by taking their spot. The closest incident was in 2018, when a Chinese warship and a U.S. destroyer were on a collision course until the U.S. ship moved out of the way.

#### **2.4.1. Diplomacy**

China is still keen on the negotiation of the South China Sea problem, but its diplomatic practice states a deferment strategy that will be aimed at collecting more weight in the maritime domain. In the first place, Beijing has attempted to alter the discourse on the South China Sea provided by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2012, Beijing put pressure on Cambodia, which prevented the publication of a joint communique to be made by ASEAN foreign ministers to formally acknowledge China had already seized Scarborough Shoal. Such a course justified the unilateral step of Beijing and restricted international opposition to the incident. In another instance, Cambodia the country that might be said to have been instructed by the Chinese, did not make a mention of that 2016 judgment by the tribunal on its 2016 ASEAN communique.

Second, the Code of Conduct negotiations between China and the ASEAN and the location of negotiation table is regulated by a 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration. When drafting a textual framework in the year 2018, Beijing added wording that limited the scope of extra-regional players. Of more notable concern was the provision that signatories must agree to “joint military exercises with non-members of the region”, a measure which would bar the United States involvement in South China Sea maneuvers with other states in the ASEAN. Another idea was that of considering the production of oil and gas in the contested waters as an undertaking that can not be engaged in collaboration with companies represented by countries outside the region. Although neither of these terms has so far been written in stone in to the now developing Code of Conduct, their inclusion captures the intent of Beijing to contain external influences in South China Sea issues.

#### **2.4.2 Actions China Has Not(yet) Taken**

The South China Sea is characterized as an area of regional hegemony whereby the Chinese strategy to achieve its endeavor is directed to reducing the likely risk of a systemic escalation or a strategic response. Beijing has not engaged in forcible takeover of maritime features relating to the Spratly Islands over which rival claimants continue to sustain ownership of the same, except its coercive appropriation of the Scarborough Shoal. It has also been observed that China has not hindered navigational freedom of the United States military resources entering or passing over the South China Sea especially outside the 12 nautical miles territorial limit. In addition, Beijing has failed to declare an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the contested waters thus avoiding a possible offensive build up of tensions in the region. Most of its aggressive action has restricted

itself to resistance of close reconnaissance at its seashore in the northern areas of South China Sea.

China operates, therefore, on the basis of the concept of the gray zone coercion, aiming mostly at the enforcement of the maritime claims without the need to resort to the armed conflict. The historical evidence suggests that the Chinese aggressiveness can be toned down due to the increased level of American resistance, which happened after the event of the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum and the termination of the massive land reclamation projects in the year 2015. This is the strategic maths of China: the deliberate attempt to achieve solidified control of disputed maritime areas without bearing the destabilising effects of direct military collisions. Such a measured and cautious style is indicative of how Beijing wants to see South China Sea revisionism at a slow pace and with cautiousness.

#### **2.4.3. Factors that may Motivate China's Behavior**

A multi-faceted review of China common aims in trying to seek superior control over the South China Sea sheds more light on the viability and inherent danger likely to emanate upon employing other policy options in the maritime front. The four key motivators that are identified in the discussion above are security, resource security, national identity, and status as the key drivers behind the strategic behavior of Beijing.

1. Historical claims. The South China Sea plays an inseparable role in the historical narrative of the PRC concerning territorial irredenta. The claim of sovereignty

over the territory is the pillar of communism; also it is a means of internal mobilization on the grounds of renewal of national dignity.

2. Economic considerations. The area is rich in commercial highways, fisheries, and potential petroleum reserves. These sources enhance the PRC in terms of maritime economics, and help it fulfill its ambition to regional domination.
3. Geostrategic imperatives. The control of the South Chinese Sea allows the Chinese to safeguard important sea lines of communication and increases the range of the Chinese naval fleet to operate beyond the first island chain.
4. Prestige. The projection of sovereignty on the sea remains will promote the Chinese regional view on the so-called peace rise and will provide it with a basis to challenge the current international order.

Collectively, these motives lead to a sophisticated and aggressive maritime stance that gives external actors, especially the United States, the need to adjust its policies towards the region.

## **2.5. Security**

The all-over security concerns of china comprise defense of its land, elevating military readiness against Taiwan, enabling free trade, and the safe dispensation of their nuclear-powered submarines. Such goals are being promoted by the long-term military modernization and not by individual activities at sea as explained in the previous part of this analysis. What is more, Beijing possesses specific security-related interests in the South China Sea such as territorial claims and consequent maritime privileges.

The second important area of concern is Taiwan, in which the PLA strategic planning involves a situation where there could be amphibious assault operations to the major sectors along the island. It places so much emphasis that the seas of the northern part of the South China Sea are under control or are vital to its functions particularly around the Philippines where U.S. soldiers may be deployed in a possible scenario (O'Rourke, 2023). Domination in this maritime corridor is not merely critical in terms of tactical victory but also covers Chinese fear that the U.S. is concerned with military interference. There is also the need on the part of China to ensure the protection of the Sea of Lines Communication (SLOCs), which pass through the South China Sea, which are essential to Chinese energy import and trade. Even though these paths also improve the regional capabilities of powers such as Japan and South Korea, these routes frequently end in Chinese ports, which makes Beijing hyper-sensitive to the possibility of the U.S. interdicting maritime trade in the event of a Taiwan-related event (Kaplan, 2014).

The fourth strategic power belongs to nuclear deterrence. The use of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) of China out of the Hainan Island is an indication that the use of South China sea as the strategic bastion of second strike capabilities. To enhance survivability, these submarines will have to be hidden in deep waters; however, at present their acoustic signature makes them susceptible to U.S. anti-submarine warfare in open waters. Therefore, Beijing considers the north part of the South China Sea as a safe area of rotation of SSBN patrols (Erickson & Goldstein, 2009). Lastly, in many regards, China has a broad spanning claims with the nine-dash line which has been criticized in its consistent violation of the UNCLOS agreements; but this is

partly ingrained within its national security governance. The South China Sea might not necessarily be a core interest in the traditional security view, yet the claims to the maritime sovereignty incorporated in the nine-dash line afford nationalistic discourses and support the geopolitical legitimacy of the Chinese government (Zhao, 2018).

## **2.6. Resources**

The hydrocarbons-most visibly, petroleum and gas-scarcely ever exist as non-determining variables in the strategic calculus that permeates Beijing PR policy towards the South China Sea. But the present literature of empirical studies leaves certain doubts on the degree to which the variable has been born out to be of decisional confirmation of the Chinese aggressiveness. Even though Beijing continues to find fertile grounds in its disputed territories using resource-based source discourses in support, the current literature has endorsed the statement that access to resources is not the main antecedent of enhanced Chinese activism (Kaplan, 2014; Erickson Collins, 2012).

Estimates of South China Sea energy reserves remain amazingly diverse, perhaps due to the fact that the precise reserves are hard to estimate. Amid such conditions, strategic interest of the region to China could be best visualized in the context of reducing the high reliance it has on imports of hydrocarbons. The existing body of evidence, however, also proves that even an extensive establishment of Chinese maritime territories would generate marginal benefits in the reduction of hydrocarbon imports, thus undermining the resource-based argument held by China (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2022).

As an example, compared to the total set (est.=) of almost 11.5 billion barrels of proven and possible oil reserves in the South China Sea, the U.S. Geological Survey and other U.S. assessments say that few income-sized amounts lie close to the Spratly Islands (EIA, 2022). In addition, much of the potential petroleum reserves occur within Malaysian, Vietnam and Brunei continental shelves, whose claims are located beyond the nine-dash line of China (Hayton, 2014). Given that China consumed around 5.3 billion barrels of oil in 2019, most of which was imported, full utilization of the regional deposits would only offer temporary respite to China markets in regards to the energy requirements. Likewise, whereas the South China Sea has an estimated amount of approximately 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, the amount of natural gas available close to the Spratly Islands is considerably small, or approximately 100 billion cubic feet, a figure that is insignificant by the standard of the annual gas consumption of close to 11 trillion cubic feet in China with the capacity expected to double by 2040 (IEA, 2021; EIA, 2022).

In turn, the maritime terms of Beijing more probably do not represent the hopes to attain direct profit in the form of immediate resource extraction; rather, they reflect the symbolism and geopolitical influence that come through sovereign control. The claim over historical entitlement to resources of waters enriched in resources provides China with its regional prominence and promotes the intimidation of the Southeast Asian littoral nations into signing joint development deals, including in the nations own Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) (Storey, 2017). Resource diplomacy then is not so much a form of energy security as it is a tool of maritime dominance to spread normative power over contested grounds in the guise of collaboration (Zhao, 2018).



## 2.7 National Identity

Material or strategic imperatives are not the only driving factor of why a state might be driven to assert its territorial control, often it is the grounded result of a long running nationalist ideology and constructs of the national identity. Also, national identity especially when performed in references to historically informed territorial imaginaries become very strong assertions of sovereignty with immense consequences of security (Callahan, 2010). After internalization of such spatial identities, it will then be considered the equivalent of retaining national legitimacy and internal integration to protect or claim the supposed territory (Reilly, 2012). With China, the modern number wall identity is constituted by two histories: one that traces the glory of imperial civilization and the other one that recalls the so-called Century of Humiliation, when the paramount foreign powers invaded Chinese sovereignty (Wang, 2008). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made an active use of the historical memory in the dissemination of its version of the national rejuvenation (民族复兴) and making the reconquest of the territories lost or disputed in the past an obligatory part of this process (Zhao, 2021), such as Taiwan or South China Sea.

Although the objective of national unity largely deals with Taiwan as the most contentious issue, South China Sea territories claimed by China are also tightly bound with its sovereign identity. With the formation of the People Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 Beijing declared the so-called Sholi Island a Chinese territory which has since the start of the 20th century, young kids were studying Chinese in the area. In the San Francisco Peace Conference of 1951, Premier Zhou Enlai was categorical to say that

these islands were of all times a part of China (Buszynski, 2012). By the mid-1950s, Chinese diplomatic rhetoric had taken on the formulation of indisputable sovereignty (无可争议主权) a phrase very much reflecting the rising importance of the maritime claims in the Chinese strategic and political language (Fravel, 2008). It is interesting to note that such language was bolder in comparison to that presented in majority of the land disputes that took place in most parts of China but because of the symbolic significance of these maritime features it is only expected that such language would be more assertive.

By the end of the Hu Jintao regime, China initiated a low-level mobilization of its claims by purportedly telling the United States in 2010 that the South China Sea was a 91-core interest<sup>91</sup> (Swaine, 2011), a term that previously was used on matters sensitive and non-negotiable like Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Swaine, 2011). Although the use of the term indicated a hardening among the Chinese capital, analysts later disagreed over whether the change in rhetoric is an announcement of an official doctrinal change or a diplomatic pivot (Mastro, 2020). Nonetheless, and regardless of the latter, the use of the South China Sea in the discourse of core national interests statistically indicates a more symbolic and ideational articulation of maritime sovereignty: A rhetoric that aims to eliminate the distinction between material policy and nationalism conceit.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's sovereignty discourse has intensified. In 2013, Xi declared that while maritime disputes should be addressed through peaceful negotiation, "legitimate rights and interests" must not be compromised, nor should "core interests" be sacrificed. Five years later, he further affirmed that "not one inch of the territory passed down by our ancestors can be lost." While such proclamations suggest a

hardening of China's official stance, internal scholarly and policy debates in China indicate a lack of consensus among elites. Diverging perspectives persist: some view the South China Sea as a genuine core interest deserving uncompromising protection, while others advocate for a more pragmatic approach that prioritizes international legitimacy and continued economic ascent over aggressive maritime claims.

In sum, while the South China Sea has attained heightened symbolic significance in the PRC's evolving national identity, China's territorial claims in the region have remained largely consistent since 1949. There is no discernible expansionist trajectory extending beyond the territorial scope delineated at the state's inception. Although national identities can and do evolve, current discourse and historical continuity suggest that China's focus remains concentrated on reinforcing longstanding claims rather than initiating new ones. Nevertheless, the entrenchment of these maritime disputes within China's identity framework implies that diplomatic strategies premised on Chinese willingness to compromise may face increasing structural resistance.

## **2.8. Status**

The role of China in the South China Sea can be seen through the prism of the status-seeking behavior that stems out of the larger vision of being the pre-eminent power in the region and worldwide. Positioning, even in international politics may not be considered solely as a measure of power but a measure of legitimacy and right to be part of international politics (Wang, 2017). Fast developing countries often find the existing international system disproportionate to their rise in power, which makes them play a role in influencing certain parts of the world related to their claimed position in the

international scale (Larson, Paul, & Wohlforth, 2014). In this regard the strategic orientation of China-its military modernization, territorial claims and capacity-building programs is typical of its quest to achieve symbolic and substantive signifiers of great power. Such actions do not always revolve around direct material advantage but rather are associated with the development of prestige, fame, and hegemony in the region (Feng & He, 2019).

Traditionally, *mianzi* (face) and national dignity have been profound concepts in guiding the elite and mass opinion in China even more so after the late 1990s. Researchers reported that issues pertaining to national respect and reclaiming China to its historical status have often been competing with, and in many cases, superseding, material interests like commercial or territorial gain (Zhao, 2021). The symbolic dimension is seen in the case of the South China Sea in the form of Beijing hoping that both small and large regional players will respect its rights and yield to its leadership position. This status-consciousness was clearly manifested at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum where PRC foreign minister Yang Jiechi when facing criticisms replied with remarks that, the notion that, China was a big country and other countries were small is just a fact (Thayer, 2011). A participation is a very related message made in 2014 by Foreign Minister Wang Yi who stated that China could not accept the behavior of smaller countries to cause trouble (Chubb, 2020). These assertions are significant to indicate the intention of being a central stakeholder in the region but also the central authority to determine the order of the region.

Despite the economic utility of the contested features in the South China Sea being rather minor, the belligerent steps of Beijing have attracted criticism across countries and have led to economical tensions. But these expenses have never discouraged China to change the nature of the strategic environment. Since 2014 to 2015, when the massive land reclamation was started in China, the city of Beijing has successfully annulled previous handicaps in physical presence and can now boast of superior military infrastructure in various features in the Spratly Islands (O'Rourke, 2023). The metaphorical aspect of this change is frequently described by the Chinese observers that call Beijing the big brother in the South China Sea. What is more, the fact that China insists on joint development agreements especially where status recognition comes under maritime tropical limits indicates that its concern is more on status recognition. China can use such agreements and implicitly imply that regional players implicitly accept its historical and legal rights within the nine-dash line even when valuations of the resources have a minimal degree of economic profit to them (Storey, 2017). Therefore, the maritime assertiveness of China cannot be entirely understood without considering the motivations behind the status which have defined how it behaves in its quest to restore regional hegemony.

## **2.9. US Interests in the South China Sea**

Any in-depth analysis of the South China Sea's significance to the United States should begin with a critical evaluation of the question of the causal relationship between the South China Sea's status as a geopolitical strategic maritime theater and the two main national interests of the United States, namely security and prosperity. These interests take on two main forms within the framework of the current U.S. grand strategy:

maintaining regional security, particularly through the defense of treaty allies, Japan and the Philippines, and defending the open, stable, and rules-based economic order in the Indo-Pacific, which facilitates international investment and trade flows and financial stability (Green, 2017; Dobbins et al., 2021).

Strategic salience of the South China Sea resides in the possibility of influence of both dimensions. To start with, the growing military confidence of China and its establishment of permanent bases in the troubled waters especially the Spratly and Paracel Islands directly affects the security of the U.S. allies and partners. Such moves not only question the land-claim of the U.S. treaty partners but also the viability of the American extended deterrence that endangers strategic miscalculation and alliance unity (O'Rourke, 2023). Second, South China Sea is considered a major maritime shipping channel; one-third of the world shipping transits through the South China Sea, hence critical to world trade. Unless challenged, Chinese actions to dominate this area by controlling them might stand to destroy the values of freedom of navigation and restructure regional norms on ocean governance (Cronin & Kaplan, 2019).

Finally, the behaviour of China in the South China Sea, is also illustrative of the wider efforts to challenge the liberal international order and call into question a regional hegemonic status. These also involve one-sided application of its claims in the nine-dash line, coercive diplomacy as well as militarization of artificial features, all of which are inconsistent with the arbitral decision issued in 2016 according to UNCLOS, which struck down a lot of the allegations by Beijing (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). The breaking down of this rules-based order poses a risk to the interest of the U.S as it leads to greater instability in the region of East Asia, less predictability in crisis

management, and it exposes other revisionist powers to undertake the same. Therefore, the South China Sea is not just a regional hot-bed, it is a measure of American strategic credibility and leadership in the world arena.

### **2.9.1. Security of Allies and Partners in the East Asia**

The security posture of the United States in East Asia is predicated on the notion that the defense of regional allies directly contributes to American national security and prosperity. This logic is most clearly institutionalized through mutual defense treaties with Japan and South Korea, and, to a more limited extent, with the Philippines under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (Green, 2017). Although the United States does not maintain a formal security alliance with Taiwan, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 establishes a commitment to support Taiwan's self-defense, which many analysts interpret as a de facto security guarantee (Bush, 2021). However, the strategic importance of Taiwan remains a subject of intense debate. Some argue that defending Taiwan is driven primarily by ideological and democratic values, while others assert that it is central to maintaining U.S. credibility, preventing regional hegemony by China, and preserving forward-deployed military advantages in the Western Pacific (Mazarr, 2015; Dobbins et al., 2021).

The strategic significance of the South China Sea varies depending on which ally is being considered. For Japan and South Korea, the sea does not constitute a critical logistical corridor for wartime mobilization, although it offers a convenient maritime route for U.S. naval movements (O'Rourke, 2023). In contrast, access to the South China Sea is more consequential for the defense of Taiwan and the Philippines, both of which

are geographically proximate to contested maritime zones and vulnerable to Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Nonetheless, advances in long-range precision strike systems, such as standoff missiles, have introduced alternative means for the United States to project force, mitigating some geographic vulnerabilities (Work & Grant, 2019).

Beyond material capabilities, deterrence is shaped by perceptions of credibility—a multidimensional construct involving both capability and resolve. To sustain deterrence, the United States must not only demonstrate the military capacity to inflict unacceptable costs on adversaries but also articulate and implement policies that signal an unambiguous willingness to act (Schelling, 2008). Consequently, growing Chinese assertiveness in maritime regions, especially the South China Sea, presents a test of U.S. strategic credibility. If American responses are perceived as insufficient or inconsistent, allies may begin to doubt Washington's reliability, thereby undermining the broader alliance system upon which U.S. regional strategy depends (Cha, 2020).

### **2.9.2. Rules Based order in The East Asia**

According to a significant portion of academic literature, the United States is a leading supporter of the rules-based international order, particularly in the East Asian maritime region where adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is crucial (Ratner, 2013; Green, 2017). This order's concept, which states that territorial or maritime conflicts cannot be resolved by force or coercion, is another crucial issue. It is among the tenets that supported the liberal international order established by the United States following World War II (Ikenberry, 2011).



Also, the usefulness of military exercises in the region depends on its perception by actors in the region. The above activities should be perceived as more than just symbolic gestures in order to instill deterrence and assurance. Regional allies might lose confidence in the ability of Washington to carry through with long-term strategic decisions as long as they view components of U.S. military efforts unseriously or inconsistently (Cha, 2020). Such legal regimes as UNCLOS can decrease the chance of conflict by ensuring precision of what the law expects and codifying what is acceptable maritime conduct. Theorically, the possibility of the misunderstandings of rights and duties in time of peace can be reduced and present the lower level of political tension due to naval assignments (Bateman & Bergin, 2011). Nevertheless, in areas like the South China Sea where the major actors hold vastly different views regarding the interpretation and the application of the international law legal tools may ironically increase, instead of diffusing the conflict. Another example would be the refusal of the People of China to accept the 2016 arbitral decision, as well as the subsequent insistence by the Chinese Party to claim the historic rights in the nine-dash line (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016; Valencia, 2017).

### **2.9.3 South China Sea Islands and Military Bases**

The south china sea is a major source of hydrocarbon and fish resources and access to this resource is important to the allies and partners of the United States such as Vietnam and the Philippines, who are the major players in the south china sea because of their energy demand and the size of their fishing industries (Kaplan 2014; Storey 2017). The implications that have propelled Washington to be concerned about the possible

establishment of permanent Chinese military bases on the islands is based on the need to protect those allies and uphold its capability of being able to secure the region (Green et al. 2017). As the discussion below explains, bases of such kind, in as much as they have significant symbolic value, do not currently pose a direct threat to U.S. forces (O'Rourke 2021).

However, the long-term Chinese occupation of the Spratly Islands can have some longer-term consequences concerning the undermining of the application of international norms on the high seas, not to mention the precedence it will set regarding territorial expansion as a means of power projection (Bateman 2016). Although these outposts themselves may not threaten U.S. operational advantage in the immediate future, they bolster Beijing and may in fact discourage smaller members of the maritime community to exercise their own rights (Poling 2020). As a result, America needs to develop an action that is effective enough to prevent further militarization of the islands without causing an unwarranted spiral (Mastro 2019).

#### **2.9.4. Chinese Military Threats to U.S. Interests**

Due to China's overall military development and modernization, particularly its force projection in the region, the United States faces significant military risks (O'Rourke, 2021). The United States' ability to launch significant military operations in the waters off Chinese shores, especially in the northern portion of the South China Sea, is significantly hampered by China's expanding anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities (Green et al., 2017; Erickson & Goldstein, 2009). Although this issue has not been taken into account in the U.S. policy debate regarding the region, it limits U.S.

access to Northeast Asia through the South China Sea (Yung et al., 2014). While there is disagreement among analysts regarding the gravity of the new Chinese military capabilities, most agree that they will likely make it more difficult for the United States to defend allies like South Korea and Japan, but not impossible (Mastro, 2019). Furthermore, the modernization of China's military makes a possible conflict with Taiwan considerably more complex for the United States (Davidson, 2020). The ability of China, the South China Sea's largest neighbor, to establish a permanent military presence in the China Sea is also a result of its growing naval capabilities (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008). The implications of China's new bases in the South China Sea warrant close examination, as they reflect broader concerns about Beijing's intentions and long-term strategic goals in the region (Poling, 2020). These installations must be understood not only as isolated developments but as integral components of China's expanding capacity to project maritime power (Bateman, 2016). In this context, four potential scenarios are particularly relevant to U.S. interests: a trade embargo, a Taiwan contingency, a direct conflict over a Spratly feature, and a regional clash between China and another state in which the U.S. remains uninvolved. Additionally, there are implications for China's ability to establish secure bases for its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) in the South China Sea, contributing to its second-strike capability (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010). However, in contrast to China's broader A2/AD strategy, current analysis suggests that the militarization of the Spratly Islands has not significantly undermined U.S. ability to defend its Northeast Asian allies (O'Rourke, 2021).

### **Interruption of Trade**

In addition, there are other shipping routes that could cushion such effects in the event of a disruption in South China Sea. As an example, ships that were traveling along the Strait of Malacca to destinations including South Korea, Japan and Taiwan could re-route through the archipelagic waters of the Philippines and Indonesia where the increase in ship time could be only 1-2 days (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010). Such delays are not unimportant but the geopolitical and economic cost of slowing active international trade are much more significant. Conversely, China owing to its reliance on the region to access such maritime trade, has limited options, and this has led to its historic strategic interests in the insecurity that plagues its SLOCs under the Southeast Asian Sea (Storey, 2017).

Finally, the extra feature of the Spratly Island bases of China is not really vital in disrupting the trade routes. The overall modernization of Chinese military has already enabled it to affect the shipping in the northern sections of the South China Sea (Mastro, 2019). Although the Spratly outposts can increase the capability of China to cause trouble to the neighbors of the region and influence activities of the southern part of the sea, they are not the key to disrupting maritime trade when they feel like doing so. Should China see fit to disrupt the trade routes it would be able to do so without use of these forward-deployed bases (Poling, 2020).

### **Taiwan War Involving the US**

Continued militarization of Spratly Island are issues that should be closely examined by the academicians, whereas they are bound to increase the military capabilities of China in prosecuting war with the United States, particularly in times of a

Taiwan crisis. Such crisis scenario is considered as the most likely but also the most significant due to the active modernization program in Beijing and the reduction of the American room to manoeuvre with it (Davidson, 2020; Mastro, 2019). The most current operational issue right now is connected with the possibility to block a chokepoint; the broadening maritime potential of Beijing makes this scenario one of the most dangerous (Erickson, 2020).

However, a strict evaluation of the posture of the Chinese operation shows that Spratly installations will have no commanding role in any event that would involve Taiwan. As much as some observers believe that these bases in addition to ones on Woody Island would significantly increase the total capacity of Beijing, spatial and strategic modelling has indicated the contrary. First, the American carrier strike groups destined to the Taiwan Strait would, typically, enter through different passages: the reinforcements vessels would arrive through Japan, Guam, Hawaii and the mainland United States instead of the South China Sea; the ships going around the Middle East would be kept outside the South China Sea and more likely cross the Malacca Strait and the Philippine Sea (O'Rourke, 2021). Second, the missiles operating out of most of these outposts in Spratly, the Tu-2 and DF-26 missiles, would have minimal impact on a Taiwan operation, which can be argued with the strategic interest of Beijing airbases located within 800 kilometers of the island, and are far closer and logistically more beneficial (DoD, 2021).

On strategic level, the Spratly installations can be useful to the parties to the claim to the island chain, but not very strategically resilient in the face of a strong

American countermeasure. Even at the current moment, according to expert guesswork at least partly grounded in actual intelligence data, a rather modest U.S. taskforce would be needed to destroy the main fields, and air-defence systems, on the Sprattlys as well as on Woody Island. In such a scenario, the United States, in terms of the largest part, would stay in its 5 percent of their Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) stocks that are considered enough to achieve their operational success, which will reduce the influence these locations can have on Beijing (Krepinevich, 2020). Considering that the U.S already has around 3,000 JASSM and is poised to procure at least 7,000 more, including an upgraded version, the entire range of U.S. capabilities, which would comprise bombers, fighters, and maritime platforms, will have enough availability to undermine the value of such outposts (CSIS, 2020).

### **US China Spratly Scenario**

The following paper explores the risk of confrontation between the People Republic of China (PRC) and the United States of America over the Spratly Islands by using the RAND U.S China Military Scenario 2015 as a platform of approach to this subject. The situation is that of a resource conflict involving oil and gas and by asserting ownership to one of the islands Beijing ensures, that Washington is not willing to send enough troops to a location to attain expulsion of the Chinese forces which had already stationed in the area. The most prominent political effect would be the one that would appear should the island be contested by the Philippines which is a treaty partner of the United States thus escalating the stakes and raising the likelihood of hostilities.

Two mutually exclusive scenarios are generally represented in the RAND analysis. In the former case, Chinese troops on the Spratly Islands assault American troops; in the latter case, troops positioned on the mainland and additional reinforcements are rushed to the scene to fight the United States. During a medium conflict, U.S. troops destroy Chinese troops on the islands and their base installations as well as the subsinking of enemy ships and aerial vehicles. However, this triumph would come at a great cost in material resources, such as a big fleet of ships and aircraft, as well as great casualties. Although America would win, its forces would include only those in continuous battle and would have little ability to perform long-range and strategic relocation (Green et al., 2017, 57).

There is a greater chance that a wider war will come with mainland deployments only in one of two sequences. First, Beijing will be able to send reinforcements once its units in the Spratlys will be wiped out. Second it may also start aggressions on mainland which will lead to pre-empted strike by U.S forces on Chinese installations. Whenever it happens, the RAND Scorecard shows that despite Chinese modernization gaining speed, the American advantage over PRC would still be decisive in 2015 since at the time, island infrastructure was still in its great infancy in the PRC (Heginbotham et al., 2015).

Geopolitically, the issue in the Spratly Islands is not the same with the issue in Taiwan since the island territories are at a further location away than Beijing mainland. Also, U.S strategic opportunities in the South China Sea are still quite vital especially when Beijing avoids seeking intervention in the Taiwan Strait. The result is the baseline advantage of the People Liberation Army is east of the First Island Chain, in spite of the

current modernization (Erickson, 2020). In 2030, it is plausible that the modernization plans of the Chinese Army will produce abilities that can bring it temporal, geographic advantage to counter American forces during early stages of a war. Analysts note that maintaining such an edge would necessitate large-scale American offensives that, in turn, would involve high human and material capital expenditures and escalatory risk (Krepinevich, 2020; Heginbotham et al., 2015).

Concluding, the strategic superiority of the United States over the Spratly Islands is estimated to continue in a decade-long interval, but the conflict costs will increase. The modernization path that Beijing follows at the moment is gradually decreasing the operational gap, the militarization of the Spratly Islands does not, out of itself, enhance the Chinese naval capability in any conflict scenario in the future.

### **China Versus Regional State**

In a range of hypothetical cases, the actions of Beijing, in some but not all instances, present direct or indirect disruptions to American allies or partners, which elicit no immediate American reaction. Such cases ascend a forcible take over an island in the Spratlys or a rich commodity to obviously the open (or even secret) protrusion of coercive preeminence against gaining compromises by a U.S. ally; or further yet, utilizing the resources in the Spratly bases to slow down or embroil other states so that Beijing can have access to oil or gas. Such actions would be in conflict with the national interests of the United States although they would not have a direct negative impact on the territory and properties of Washington since they would violate the security patterns and normative order in the area which the American capital is trying to preserve (Poling,



2020; O. Rourke, 2021). In addition, such a relationship affects the perceived ability and trustworthiness of Washington, in terms of performing business activities in the Indo-Pacific region (Green et al., 2017).

Further Chinese military bases in Spratly Islands would increase Beijing ability to impose the hypothetical scenarios. Such territories can add to current Chinese strategic range, but they do not create a strategic military gain. These enhanced mainland capabilities of Chinese forces that were forged in building of infrastructure in Spratlys, have extended the energy-projection horizons of Beijing towards Vietnam and the Philippines. Mainland aircrafts can now fly close to and not in the territory of Spratly-island ranges, which means that Chinese leadership has more access to tactical choices and fuel (Heginbotham et al., 2015).

Such outposts remain controversial in terms of their main target: does the agenda stay territorial or geostrategic in terms of scope. According to other observers, Beijing has been trying to coerce the other claimants in the South China Sea to surrender their claims and adopt an arrangement that leaves Beijing in practical control of the region (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010; Krepinevich, 2020). These are not the only ultimate, however, on which such territorial ambitions may be established. At the same time, the modernised Chinese coast guard has become operable enough to extend its operations not only to the South China Sea but also to the grey zones and the new military bases ensure Beijing of long-term presence in the South of the region and make the bullying of minor claimants to the maritime realm more easy (Mastro, 2019). Frequent patrols in the water

by the naval and maritime forces are also used to redistribute China over the most important channels and contentious formations in South China Sea (CSIS, 2020).

#### **2.9.5. ABastion for Ballistic Missile Submarines**

Fellow compadres, consider first that China is seemingly considering a bastion anchoring system of its nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) in a geographically unique bastion-like region within the South China Sea and is seemingly willing to defend such a bastion by applying customary, conventional means. Connection In the same breath, the People's Liberation Army has mobilized antisubmarine warfare (ASW) aviation platforms including rotary wing and fixed wing to the Spratlys with the view of these detecting and disrupting the action of U.S. nuclear attack submarines that may be sneaking about Beijing's SSBNs (O'Rourke, 2021). Use of airfields on the Spratlys would allow much more rapid response and a wider latitude of surveillance and strike ranges over the southern and central South China Sea (Erickson & Goldstein, 2009).

However, this development should be put in the context of a bigger strategic reasoning. The growing presence of China in the areas allows it to restrict, or at least block the movement of U.S. surface dividers and air power which could restrict its own operations, in the event of clash (Heginbotham et al., 2015). Of course, the question that then lingers is whether the potentiality of aviation outfits in Spratly does otherwise enhance the ASW stance of Beijing, or otherwise makes the possible American effort in dispatching such towering outposts an uphill battle. The viability of the U.S. military in denying China a survivable second strike capability has therefore continued to be the key

issue in the prevailing security discourse and even American analysts have gone to the extent of postulating that such denial could be counter productive (Acton, 2011). Whether the rationality of such an argument holds or not, the fact is that Beijing can understand the American demeanor as an attempt at undermining the Chinese retaliatory stance so that a secure bastion to house the SSBN fleet becomes a new strategic necessity. The strategic stability view of such a strongly strategic defence posture would appear to be from the Chinese viewpoint, reasonably strong strategically, but limited threat to national security in the U.S.

## **2.10 Chinese Threats to UNCLOS and Credibility**

A set of changing dynamics is making the interests of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region a more convoluted matter. The most notable of them all is the fact that China defies established international legal norms and institutions, in particular, its failure to uphold the established UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that was designed to govern maritime activities in East Asia. The issue of long term viability and plausibility of the American defence stance in the South China Sea is a second, related concern. As Washington continues to pursue the initiative to contain the rising Chinese assertiveness, there is a risk that its activities will be taken as being provoking and as a result, its credibilities on the part of China might end up being jeopardized. Additionally, this stance has strong implications to the allies that U.S has in the region most of who depend on the American security guarantees. Indications are growing that as long as the friction in the South China Sea continues, and as the U.S. proves to not be able to stop Chinese hegemony decisively, with sanctions perhaps being the only recourse available to it, it will lose credibility with the allies as well as become less

credible with China itself. Despite retaining some strategic instruments, notably the national commitments of formal alliance, the empirical evidence is doubtful about the extent such mechanisms have or can withstand the other influences of the loss of U.S. influence in the region.

### **2.10.1 China's Interpretations of UNCLOS**

The current and probably future understanding of China of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is very problematic. The latter is currently arguing that even the right of navigation requires the prior permission of the foreign military vessel to enter the territorial waters of China, a position that is highly unacceptable on the United States principles of freedom of navigation, that it vehemently asserts in South China Sea and everywhere. Also, Beijing objects to the lawfulness of any US intelligence-harvesting activities in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) arguing that this should be described as maritime scientific research which UNCLOS assigns to coastal governments only. The application of this discrepancy in interpretation sees the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling as well with both parties disagreeing on the basis of authority and its execution..

Although China has not forced the United States to accept its interpretation of UNCLOS, its objections to US surveillance operations are based on both legal logic and geopolitical considerations. China perceives such measures as intrinsically adversarial, regardless of their legal permissibility under international law. While there have been sporadic situations in which Chinese soldiers disputed US maritime activities, most notably in 2009 and 2018, Beijing has generally avoided outright obstruction. Chinese

vessels typically shadow US naval operations, such as Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), but do not directly intervene. However, this pattern increases the possibility of inadvertent escalation during shadowing maneuvers or aerial interceptions, but such encounters are likely to be limited in scope.

### **2.10.2. US Credibility with China**

These potential future alterations can literally be attributed to the interdependence of logic of credibility where when the state fails to sustain one set of interests, an enemy bases it on the understanding that they are less likely to honor other agreements (Glaser, 2011). This can be achieved by two manners. The former is rooted in the perceptions of China that the United States displayed similarities in various factors in regions where it toned down its stance to those where it did not and that these aspects included location, the types and extent of U.S interest and the level of commitment (Friedberg, 2011). The US interests in the region are at stake should China discover a correlation between the inability to defend an ally in its claims on the ocean with the security of the location of the ally and Taiwan as well as the weakness in the US alliances (Mastro, 2019).

The second step involves China realizing that when one variable of its interest on the South China Sea changes in the realm of the United States interests on other issues, then the perception China had on the South China Sea will be swayed (Glaser, 2011). The most notable shift is the shift in the power structure especially in the East Asia in the form of an increase of the military presence arm of the Chinese military (Friedberg, 2011). In case Chinese rulers feel that their increasing military power is making the

United States reduce the proportion of its interests in the South China Sea, they should anticipate that the American credibility in the US protection of its other interests will diminish (Mastro, 2019).

Even though the issue regarding US credibility is understandable, the decrease in US resistance when China tries to take over the South China Sea should not, theoretically, affect US credibility that much (Glaser, 2011). The United States should also part its interests with key plausibility bond that ties the claims in the South China Sea with its allies, since there is a huge difference between its interests in the East Asian region (Friedberg, 2011). Consequently, when the United States resolves to decrease its military opposition to Chinese efforts at dominance in the South China Sea, it needs to officially tell all involved parties that the security of its allies is more following and acts to defend against territory claims of minor features in the South China Sea, or even the last consolidation of Chinese totality over the region (Mastro, 2019).

But verbiage is not of great value after all. In the event that the United States wishes to assume less risk in its interactions with China and still proceed with its ambitions of dominating the South China Sea, then it majorly needs to be in a position of assuring its allies in the East Asia, especially that of ensuring that it maintains and promotes US military forces that are engaged in the process of safeguarding their partners (Glaser, 2011). The United States can make some big steps to prepare, rehearse, and exchange intelligence with its close allies alleviating them and expressing its own seriousness towards the Chinese (Friedberg, 2011). Moreover, the fact the United States is now determined to set up new security agreements with Australia, the United

Kingdom, and the United States (called AUKUS) points at the fact that the country is growing rather than shrinking in terms of ensuring its critical interests in East Asia (Cheng, 2021).

Although the intention of the measures is to enhance the credibility of the US, some observers in the region reckon that the measures will end up being futile (Glaser, 2011). Communications are often misinterpreted and acted upon in the wrong way. Also, China can be somewhat starts to make cook its victories, by even stating American concessions, yet omitting the displays of amicability among Americans (Friedberg, 2011). To illustrate the case, when the world experienced the 2008 global financial crisis, China panicked and decided that it was against one of the most significant indicators of low US wealth, capacities, and might (Mastro, 2019). Consequently, despite having a high degree of conditional connectedness in the area of credibility logic, the attempts made by the United States to reverberate its credibility can still become unsuccessful. Consequently, no matter the measures that the United States may take to ensure that there is security to its image, the risks will still exist (Glaser, 2011).

This risk will depend on the significance of the region hegemony in East Asia to the Chinese (Friedberg, 2011). Since the beginning of the previous two decades, senior Chinese leaders have claimed that China does not want the US-led coalitions in the region and, thus, appears to pursue the regional hegemony (Cheng, 2021). Even much later in the late 1990s, China indicated that it did not support the U.S-led security mechanisms in the region because the obsolete approach of security which encompassed military alliances and armament carriage would not achieve much in terms of giving the

world security (Friedberg, 2011). Asia should not depend on other states when it comes to security because that is what Jiang Zemin, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, proposed back in 2002 (Cheng, 2021). The new concept of security is also in effect to ditch the cold war thinking where China is trying to achieve collective and multilateral security through mutual beneficial cooperation as postulated by a 2003 position statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC (Friedberg, 2011).

The US alliance system was invited into the narrative about the Asian security, which gained prominence under Xi Jinping (Cheng, 2021). Xi elaborated further on this notion in a 2014 speech during which he introduced a new Asian security concept that contributes to the realization of more security-related cooperation. According to him, a fortification and development of allies which are directed at the third party is a good idea and that Asia should be able to have a role to play in Asian scenarios of problems and security (Cheng, 2021). Simultaneously, China advanced the slogan of "Community of Common Destiny," and the coalitions are regarded as a security threat (Friedberg, 2011).

The only unsure thing is how seriously china would approach this issue and how many funds it is willing to utilize so as to implement this idea (Glaser, 2011). All the same statements and publications that actively criticise partnerships do not argue for the exclusion or discarding of the United States, whereas the Chinese perspective is more prominent (Cheng, 2021). A 2017 white paper stated directly that it would have to collaborate with the pre-existing military blocs (Friedberg, 2011). Moreover, most of the military policy of China is aimed at defeating Taiwan in the event of a war, whereas influencing the American presence in the region and interfering with its operations in



nations where an official commitment of military support does not exist (such as Singapore, Malaysia and so on) is not the primary military objective (Mastro, 2019). Even though China is angered by US alliances and publically speaks against them, it remains confused whether it has intention or capabilities to give everything to dismantle them (Glaser, 2011).

That China might not be focused on acquiring regional hegemony in the short to medium term, has significant consequences in the US policies regarding actions which may be taken (Friedberg, 2011). It reduces the risks that a policy of this nature can create in terms of the fact that it may be viewed as somehow eroding the sense of the United States of its own ability to fulfil its security commitments to treaty partners and its ability to protect them (Mastro, 2019). A shift in Chinese future policies of regional hegemony- that China is willing to go to war to win- would give lots of chances to the United States to regain its lost credibility (Glaser, 2011). The suggestion here is that partialist policy retrenchment in the South China Sea is not unacceptable, even though it will entail the spread of some elements of risks in order to sustain the US credibility (Friedberg, 2011).

### **2.10.3 US Credibility with Allies**

The strategic posture of the United States in the South China Sea involves an implicit obligation to support the maritime claims and territorial integrity of its regional allies. While violations of these claims by external actors may not directly threaten U.S. sovereign interests, failure to respond can significantly diminish Washington's credibility as a security guarantor (Zhang, 2021). Inaction in the face of assertive behavior by the People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly against states such as the Philippines,

Vietnam, and Malaysia, may result in the erosion of alliance trust. The degradation of bilateral and multilateral partnerships subsequently introduces broader risks to the regional security framework underpinning U.S. strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific (Green, 2021).

Credibility within alliance systems is fundamentally rooted in perceptions of both political will and operational capacity. U.S. policymakers may utilize a combination of military presence, economic incentives, and diplomatic assurances to reinforce commitment to defense treaties and mutual interests (Hiebert, 2022). The United States retains a structural advantage over China in defense infrastructure and alliance networks; however, regional developments complicate this leverage. In Northeast Asia, increasing Chinese economic entrenchment has generated constraints on U.S. influence, particularly in Japan and South Korea, where economic interdependence with China reduces flexibility in strategic alignment with U.S. objectives (Kuo, 2023).

Within Southeast Asia, alliance asymmetry and policy fragmentation further compound credibility challenges. The region exhibits significant heterogeneity—ranging from treaty-aligned states to neutral actors and dissenters of U.S. strategic objectives. The Philippines, in particular, has actively sought explicit clarification regarding U.S. defense commitments under the Mutual Defense Treaty, amid intensified coercive behavior by China in contested maritime zones (O’Rourke, 2023). Strategic uncertainty is reinforced by decades of inconsistent U.S. engagement, allowing Beijing to exploit gaps through economic diplomacy and asymmetrical influence. China’s position as the primary trade partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), surpassing both the United States and the European Union, grants it economic leverage that supports its

strategic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability in conflict escalation (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). Furthermore, the perception within U.S. policy circles that Southeast Asia holds limited strategic value may undermine long-term efforts to deter adversarial expansion and sustain credible defense posturing.

#### **2.10.4. How Hard Should the United States Resist China?**

The U.S. policy framework regarding the South China Sea is multifaceted and must ultimately address the degree to which Washington is prepared to counter Beijing's efforts to assert regional hegemony. This necessitates a careful weighing of the potential risks and benefits associated with various levels of opposition. The primary risk lies in the potential for escalation to armed conflict, which would be contingent on both U.S. responses and China's willingness to resort to force. A more assertive U.S. stance could also strain bilateral relations with China. Conversely, a more robust U.S. posture may bolster American credibility both vis-à-vis China and among regional allies by reinforcing deterrence and affirming commitment to the rules-based order.

In the short term, the United States should maintain its current level of resistance to China's assertive activities in the South China Sea, while adopting a less overtly confrontational approach within that framework. For instance, in the event of a high-risk scenario such as China's military occupation of additional maritime features, Washington should consider avoiding direct military retaliation. In such circumstances, a calibrated strategy, potentially including strategic ambiguity or even bluffing, may serve U.S. interests more effectively than escalation. A key rationale for sustaining this moderate level of resistance is the observation that China appears to be deterred. Prior to its

intensification of activities over the past decade, China pursued a slow, incremental approach to expanding influence in the region. As of 2022, Beijing has not forcefully taken control of the approximately 45 maritime features occupied by other claimants, nor has it obstructed foreign naval operations or coerced states into expelling U.S. military personnel.

China has largely employed non-military instruments—such as its coast guard and maritime militia to assert its maritime claims, only involving the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) when absolutely necessary. This reliance on paramilitary actors suggests a reluctance to trigger major military confrontation, reinforcing the assessment that deterrence remains effective (Grossman, 2022; Zhang, 2021). However, given the relatively limited strategic interests the United States holds in the South China Sea, a policy of more aggressive military opposition would likely be disproportionate and potentially counterproductive (O’Rourke, 2023). Establishing rigid commitments or red lines could provoke China into a more confrontational posture, deteriorate U.S.-China relations further, and foster unrealistic expectations within the U.S. domestic audience regarding military responses to Chinese provocations (Mastro, 2020).

Ongoing reassessment of China's intentions and behavior is essential. Should Beijing signal a marked escalation in its assertiveness such as efforts to seize Scarborough Shoal, construct a fifth outpost, or forcibly expel other claimants from occupied features the United States may be compelled to revise its strategy (Green, 2021). In such a scenario, adopting a policy of partial retrenchment may paradoxically emerge as the most prudent course of action. Although it might entail ceding limited Chinese influence over

the South China Sea, this posture would help avoid entanglement in a conflict over non-vital interests while preserving U.S. military readiness for more significant contingencies in East Asia (White House, 2022).

Subsequent sections elaborate on the key components of a U.S. strategy to respond to China's behavior in the South China Sea, including the militarization and appropriation of features, coercive diplomacy, and interference with navigational rights. Decisions concerning each component will shape the broader strategic posture and influence the associated risks. This analysis emphasizes policy options that bear directly on crisis escalation and conflict management. At the same time, the United States should continue supporting parallel strategies that carry minimal risk of military confrontation. These include enhancing the maritime security capacity of littoral states through improved domain awareness and naval capabilities, and sustaining legal and diplomatic backing for the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, which upholds coastal states' rights under international law (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016; Hiebert, 2022).

#### **2.10.5. Deterring and Responding to China's Seizure of Features**

In analytical terms, the central question that the U.S. should consider posing about its policies towards the South China Sea is: *How ambitiously should the United States counter Beijing in establishing its control over the region?* Developing an answer requires weighing the risks and benefits of various policy postures—ranging from direct armed conflict to more indirect forms of strategic competition—while also considering the possible degradation of U.S.-China relations and the potential benefits of bolstering U.S. credibility and assuring regional allies (Green, 2021; Mastro, 2020).

The most dangerous outcome is the escalation into armed conflict. This largely depends on Washington's chosen level of assertiveness and whether Beijing is willing to respond militarily. Increased American opposition may provoke China into a serious confrontation, potentially triggering a feedback loop of escalating military postures (Grossman, 2022). A related risk is that aggressive U.S. policy may exacerbate tensions in an already strained bilateral relationship. However, the primary opportunity in a more competitive U.S. stance is the potential strengthening of American credibility in the eyes of both China and regional partners. Nevertheless, China's strategic calculus is complex: while Beijing may gain credibility by resisting U.S. pressure, it might also perceive that Washington is pursuing a containment strategy, which would be unacceptable from the Chinese perspective (Zhang, 2021; Kuo, 2023).

Given these dynamics, it may be most prudent for the United States to maintain its current level of opposition to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea in the short term. This implies a restrained approach, avoiding direct military responses even if China captures additional features in the region. Such restraint could serve as a politically costless bluff—allowing for deterrence without commitment—though it risks encouraging Chinese miscalculation of U.S. intentions (Hiebert, 2022). Historical patterns suggest Beijing has preferred gradual expansion and has deployed the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) only when strategically necessary, indicating a cautious approach that is still responsive to credible deterrence (O'Rourke, 2023; Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

However, relying on a strategic bluff assumes that U.S. interests in the region are sufficiently compelling to justify sustained deterrence. This is a questionable premise,

given the limited direct U.S. vital interests in the South China Sea. The potential costs of strong opposition could outweigh the benefits, especially if Chinese responses lead to more aggressive policies elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific (White House, 2022). As China's ambitions continue to expand, Washington will likely need to reassess its approach. When escalation risks grow and deterrence begins to fail, partial retrenchment may become the most reasonable option. The U.S. should avoid unnecessarily confrontational moves that harden China's resolve, even if it means conceding to a limited Chinese sphere of influence during peacetime while retaining the ability to respond decisively in wartime (Kuo, 2023).

In practice, this means continuing freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and asserting naval presence, but refraining from directly confronting Chinese enforcement actions against non-allied Southeast Asian states. This nuanced approach aligns with a broader strategic goal: to reduce the likelihood of military conflict while preserving U.S. credibility and sustaining support among allies. The subsequent sections will dissect elements of the U.S. strategy, including China's territorial expansion, coercive diplomacy, militarization of disputed features, and interference with U.S. naval operations. In each case, the analysis tends toward recommending less confrontational policy options that balance deterrence with strategic caution (Green, 2021; Hiebert, 2022).

#### **2.10.6. Deterring and Responding to China's Intimidation**

One of the central pillars of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy involves deterring and responding to China's growing assertiveness and intimidation tactics across the region. Beijing's actions ranging from militarization of disputed islands in the South China Sea to pressure on Taiwan and coercive diplomacy against smaller regional states have been widely viewed as efforts to reshape the regional order in its favor (Green, 2021). The United States, along with its allies, seeks to counter this behavior by reinforcing deterrence through forward military presence, strategic partnerships, and interoperability with regional forces. The strengthening of the Quad (U.S., India, Japan, and Australia), and deepening military ties with the Philippines, Vietnam, and others, serve as visible steps toward deterring Chinese coercion without escalating into open conflict (Mastro, 2020).

China's intimidation tactics often exploit the "gray zone" actions that fall below the threshold of armed conflict but have strategic impact, such as economic retaliation, disinformation campaigns, and harassment of foreign vessels using maritime militia (Hiebert, 2022). In response, the U.S. emphasizes an integrated deterrence approach, combining military readiness with diplomatic pressure and economic tools to create strategic costs for aggressive behavior. For example, coordinated sanctions and export controls have been used in response to human rights violations and coercive actions in the South China Sea. The U.S. also supports regional resilience through capacity-building initiatives, including maritime domain awareness and cyber defense cooperation with ASEAN countries (White House, 2022).



However, effective deterrence requires more than military might it necessitates sustained engagement, clear signaling, and credible consequences for hostile actions. Washington must strike a balance between deterrence and dialogue, ensuring that its posture does not push China toward greater aggression or alienate regional partners wary of great-power confrontation. Strategic communication, both publicly and through backchannels, plays a key role in managing tensions and reducing the risks of miscalculation. Ultimately, the credibility of U.S. deterrence lies in its ability to demonstrate resolve while maintaining the moral and legal high ground in regional affairs (Kuo, 2023).

#### **2.10.7 Responding to China's Militarization of Features**

United States should make it clear to China that even with the number of bases that it has established in the South China Sea, it will still be in position to protect its allies whatever level of resistance it will develop against the aggressiveness of China. Consequently, the US ought to send whatever extra force (including air-launched standoff munitions) are needed to face comfortably the accretion of China in the Spratly Islands. Moreover, the US needs to come up very strongly to say that it will be adding to this addition of these Chinese websites. The same solution ought to assuage the point that the South China Sea bases of China are undermining US capacity by leading the US to relocate troops which would otherwise have been dedicated to central missions elsewhere in the East Asian theatre. The procurement would not burden the US defense budget with an undue burden as the new forces would be so minute when measured against the United States forces as a whole.

However, considering that China already controls the Spratly Islands, the United States should not place a high political value on China's Spratly bases. Instead, it should view this military development as an extension of China's ongoing military modernization and expansion, and devise a strategy to confront it.

#### **2.10.8 Protecting the Navigational Rights of US Naval Vessels**

China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea including militarization of artificial islands, harassment of foreign vessels, and the use of maritime militia poses a direct challenge to the navigational freedoms upheld by the U.S. and its allies. U.S. naval vessels have frequently encountered Chinese military ships and aircraft engaging in unsafe or aggressive maneuvers, raising the risk of unintended escalation (Grossman, 2022). By continuing regular patrols and joint exercises with allied navies, the U.S. seeks to demonstrate its commitment to uphold international norms and deter coercive behavior. However, such actions also invite criticism for contributing to regional militarization, and they necessitate careful management to avoid miscommunication or conflict at sea (Zhang, 2021).

Beyond military presence, the U.S. also emphasizes legal and diplomatic efforts to support navigational rights. It works closely with ASEAN countries and other regional partners to promote a rules-based maritime order and supports the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling that invalidated much of China's maritime claims under UNCLOS (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). The continued focus on protecting navigational rights is not solely a matter of U.S. strategic interest but also a demonstration of its broader role as a guarantor of international law and maritime security. As great power

competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific, the ability of the U.S. to defend these rights without provoking confrontation will remain a delicate but essential strategic objective.

The planet is currently finding its feet and getting accustomed to this possible geopolitical change. The Indo-Pacific is expected to respond in many ways. The U.S allies and close partners might show a lot of concern, however, the rest of the states would be expected to show cautious optimism regarding nuclear-armed antagonists engaging in negotiations and attempting to find peaceful solutions to the problem of their conflicts. It applies especially to the countries of the Indo-Pacific region that are constantly afraid of getting locked in the middle.

At the same time, some of these nonaligned countries of the Global South might fear that the effectiveness of their strategies of hedging, which help them to 'play off one power against the other', would decrease considerably. The nonaligned of the Global South are likely to fear that the viability of their hedging policies, which is making them take advantage of the rivalry of the powerful states, can be greatly reduced. Japan on the one hand fears that the strengthening of U.S-China relationship will allow Beijing to claim disputed islands including the Senkakus or even invade Taiwan forcing Japan to intervene to defend the security of the Ryukyu islands with the westernmost island lying just 68 miles off the coast of Taiwan.

The risk from North Korea is what South Korea is mainly focussing on, and it could potentially suffer some significant strategic repercussions to Washington increasing the extent of its relationship with Beijing, or with Moscow, or both. In case Washington focuses more on cooperation with these two rather than Seoul, the last-mentioned may

lose potential power in the course of negotiations with North Korean leaders. United States can overlook North Korean aid of Russian forces in Ukraine and allow Pyongyang to strengthen its force to engage in having a possible fight in Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, less pressure would be experienced by Beijing and Moscow to encourage the denuclearisation of North Korea, and they were also likely to get reprieve concerning United Nations sanctions against North Korea, assuming they could be agreed under the United States. The country with the most stake in Asia is Taiwan. The island of Taipei has long been an ally on a strategic level and the historical expectation that Beijing was to attack the island led to an expected response by Washington in a form of military intervention.

United States President Joe Biden clearly stated in four occasions that American military would help Taipei in these situations, hence Washington is moving towards a position of strategic certainty too. However, in case of an improvement in U.S.-China relations, Taiwan will question the veracity of the assertions of Biden. Any American deal with the Kremlin over Ukraine that allows Russia to keep annexed territory will continue to set off alarm bells in Taiwan about America commitments to its security and survival. Most states in Southeast Asia would respond favorably to any U.S. opening to China and Russia since almost none of them want to become of great-power competition and possible confrontation in the region. The United States main strategic allies; Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam all have a very strict kind of foreign policy of non-alignment that does not prefer any major power, over the other. On the other hand, they have been hedging upon big countries to preserve themselves.

Vietnam is the sole nation in the globe that has seen the three-way meetings involving Biden, Xi, and Putin since Russia invaded Ukraine. The other nations of the region like Brunei and Malaysia would as well follow suit on a transition. Cambodia and Laos are solidly placed under the umbrella of China strategic position and can only expect better returns should there be cooperative relations between Washington and Beijing. Myanmar is locked in civil war, with strong security relationships with both China and Russia; thus, a shift to a different approach by the United States seems likely to be well-received in that regard. Thailand, which is a treaty partner of the United States, would most likely accept deepening of the U.S.-China relations since Bangkok does not see the same urgency in the concern about the threat of Chinese.

The only state of the Southeast Asian region that could undoubtedly be impacted severely through a radical change in American policy regarding China and Russia is the integral U.S. ally in the security domain, the Philippines. Over the decades, Manila has been forced to deal with the encroachment by Beijing into its exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea, and especially the Spratly Islands and at Scarborough Shoal. The flagrant disrespect of Beijing to the international law and norms has caused various risky ocean accidents with the grey-zone strategies employed by the Chinese coast guard and militarized fishing fleet. This has been especially the case when Manila in some cases has been trying to provision its troops aboard the World War II Sierra Madre tank landing ship at Second Thomas Shoal. Several measures of hardening its alliance and deterrence have been developed by the United States and the Philippines and one such initiative is the extension of the Philippine bases at the disposal of the U.S. army; five such bases have been boosted to nine. In case Washington and Beijing improve their relationship, it

goes without saying that Manila would be concerned about what it may mean to the relationship.

The Indo-Pacific smaller and medium-sized countries would certainly lose these chances in case U.S. policy is experiencing a change in the future. Better U.S. relations with China and Russia would be welcomed in Oceania, in general, with the small governments in the Pacific islands growing increasingly worried about heightened great-power rivalry. Better U.S. relations with China and Russia would most likely also be appreciated in Oceania, with the smaller Pacific island countries becoming more and more anxious at the escalating great-power competition. It is interesting to note that both Australia and New Zealand are the exceptions, in a way that Australia is an ally of the U.S security whereas New Zealand is a close ally. Canberra has in recent years deemed Beijing as its greatest geostrategic threat and has consolidated its alliance with Washington, especially with regards to enhancing its membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and also signing the Australia-U.K.-U.S. pact. .

New Zealand worries are heightening. A month earlier the Cook Islands, an independent country that had to work closely with Wellington in the security area working along the long free association agreement, single-handedly decided that it wanted to join with China to strengthen its maritime security in the islands. The recent live-fire drill by Chinese war vessels in the Tasman Sea, which connects both Australia and New Zealand, has risen fears that the frontward presence in Oceania can be considered important by Beijing. Mongolia and North Korea can be expected to reject and weaken U.S. Russian or U.S. Chinese détente, although they give different reasons.

Mongolia, the country between Russia and China, always balances its relationships with these 2 countries to survive; therefore, the United States has played an important role as a third neighbour to maintain the sustainability. Ulaanbaatar would lose strategic power without Washington. The country (North Korea) faces an unusual dilemma: it relies on China and Russia to counter the United States but getting closer to the latter two may largely undermine this policy.

The situation is at the initial stages under the Trump administration with regard to dealing with the major adversaries of the United States. It is not at all necessary that a transition takes place. However, should this premise be true, then it can be expected that the greater part of the Indo-Pacific area, except nearby allies and partners of the U.S., will show a general optimism in regards to stabilisation of their region.

## **CHAPTER-3**

### **3. CHALLENGES FOR REGIONAL SECURITY**

#### **3.1 Threat to the Sea Lanes of Communication:**

##### **Introduction**

The Sea Lanes of Communication are very important for the whole world, not just for the South East and East Asian Region. The geographical environment and how it affects local and global states give it its value and meaning. The region is very convoluted because of the strange way water is spread out and the way the land is shaped, with continental slopes, shallow continental shelves, deep-sea basins, troughs, trenches, and volcanic and coral islands. There are more than 62 features in all. There are a lot of big and tiny islands in the area that make the waters split off and create different seas. There are several canals, passages, and straits that connect the seas even more. The Asia Pacific region is home to numerous famous, busy, and important straits that are important for both strategy and trade.

The Strait of Malacca is a 600-mile-long and 300-mile-wide strait that connects the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean. It flows eastward. The Phillip channel and the strait of Singapore are the narrowest places. It isn't that deep; the deepest part is 72 feet. The Singapore Strait connects Malacca. The Lombok Strait is much deeper, larger, and emptier than the Strait of Malacca, hence it is commonly used as an alternative route instead of the main passage. Bulky and big tankers frequently choose this route to get from the Persian Gulf to Japan since it is seen to be the safest (Guoxing, 2000).



The Strait Prince is an alternative route to access Malaccatown with caution. It extends for 50 miles and possesses powerful currents, rendering it impractical and useless for maritime vessels. Cellular Device. The South China Sea is the longest Sea Lane of Communication (SLOC), extending 1,800 nautical miles from Sumatra to Taiwan. It encompasses four principal island groupings and three significant oil development regions, facilitating access for travelers to North-East Asia, South-East Asia, and the Middle East. The Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea are crucial for regional and global authorities for maritime security, stability, and maritime trade. The Strait of Malacca and the Singapore Strait are the most congested and bustling straits globally. The South China Sea is significant for economic reasons, including its oil and gas reserves, fishing prospects, and eco-tourism potential on its islands. The region holds strategic significance due to its several advantageous locations for outposts that can monitor and regulate the marine communication routes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The US and Russian fleets conduct operations globally, including in the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and various other locations. Their legitimacy and success are contingent upon the passage, so they ardently advocate for the internationalization of these straits.

The Asian region is proximate to trade routes and maritime communication channels in the Asia Pacific area. These routes traverse narrow straits that can readily obstruct them, rendering them highly vulnerable. Any effort by neighboring states in these straits to obstruct or impede the uninterrupted flow of trade and commerce, or to detain ships, could jeopardize the security of maritime communication routes in the area and globally (Mubarok, 2020).

The tumultuous and aggressive ties among the US, Japan, China, and other regional nations constitute a significant threat to the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) in the region. A cordial and stable relationship among regional governments, along with a serene and hospitable environment, is essential for the security of the SLO and the uninterrupted flow of trade and oil through it. For maritime transportation to be stable and unambiguous, the region must be serene.

Particularly regarding China and the United States, any issues or animosities between the two, or any efforts to foster distrust or undermine the existing strategic alliance over the SLOC, would destabilize the region, jeopardize SLOC security, and impede maritime transactions.

The issue of ownership or sovereignty over the contested islands and overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones or maritime claims poses a significant threat to the security of Sea Lines of Communication in the region. A protracted dispute exists concerning the Exclusive Economic Zone and ownership over some islets in the East and South China Sea. These islets host significant straits and maritime communication routes. Both island disputes have the potential to escalate into open conflict, hence compromising the safety of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), as maritime transportation and related operations would be impeded during wartime. In March 1999, two vessels, unrecognized as Japanese, fled into international waters when Japan cautioned them to remain outside its territorial waters. In June 1999, the two Koreas engaged in a conflict on the fishing zone in the Yellow Sea. Both nations asserted ownership over the fishing zone, resulting in an arms race. The nations bordering the South China Sea are concerned about the security of the Sea Lines of Communication

(SLOCs) in that region. Japan is concerned due to the escalating tensions and China's involvement in the East China Sea.

The construction of navies, naval bases, and associated infrastructure by regional nations poses an additional danger to the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC). Numerous nations bordering the South and East China Seas are endeavoring to augment and enhance their naval capabilities in the vicinity of these critical straits and communication channels. To enable the coastal regions of Korea and Taiwan to transport nuclear fuel from their reactors via maritime routes for conversion into plutonium, then retrieving it by sea.

Ultimately, the SLOC must address atypical security concerns, including piracy, drug trafficking, maritime hijacking, natural disasters, and pollution. The Straits of Malacca and Sunda, the coastal regions of Vietnam and Cambodia, certain portions of Hong Kong, the northern regions of Taiwan, and the Yellow Sea are recognized as pirate hotspots or red zones. Armed robbery is prevalent throughout Southeast Asia. Pollution, particularly oil spills, is an escalating issue that endangers marine ecosystems, the fishing sector, and the uninterrupted movement of vessels. The initial occurrence of this type of oil pollution transpired in the Sea of Japan, when 6,400 tons were discharged from the compromised ship *Juliana*. The subsequent event involved the discharge of 80 tons of bunker-C from South Korea near Incheon Harbor. Concerns persist over a significant oil leak in heavily trafficked waterways such as the Malacca Strait, which may halt or severely impede maritime commerce. Tank washings further discharge oil, constituting another form of pollution. A 200,000-ton tanker can discharge around 300,000 gallons of tank washings into the ocean during a single voyage. Natural

disasters such as floods, tropical storms, adverse ocean conditions, tsunamis, and other maritime dangers significantly impede the movement of ships.

### **3.2 Possibility of Limited or Full-Blown War: Escalation**

One can predict the likelihood of a small-scale or major war after a quick study of the security concerns and possible conflicts in East Asia. The South and East China Seas are prime examples of problems that might easily turn into major war. Since the claimant governments are unwilling to compromise, it seems unlikely that the territorial disputes in the South and East China Sea would be settled amicably in the near future. China is building man-made islands in the disputed territories and patrolling and monitoring the area. China has proposed drilling in the disputed and unsettled features of the Islands and created free air zones.

Because of its immense power and influence, China currently controls every aspect of the islands in both seas. The rim or claimant states become irate and frustrated as a result. It is important to recognize that in the complex East Asian area, the competition is not limited to the US and China but also involves regional US-aligned countries that are also working to limit China's rise and aggression. Without outside intervention, a dispute between two countries is less likely to occur, which raises the possibility of a full-scale conflict. Without the backing of the United States, no country would consider taking action against China because of its bold territorial claims. The claimant states have benefited from the US presence, which has also lessened their suffering. They help other claimant countries against China and offer military and financial support to friends in the region. In that case, how authority is distributed or oriented will determine how territorial conflicts are resolved.

The asserting governments may have their claims recognized if the US and its allies hold a dominant position in the power structure. If not, China will quickly or gradually take control of all strategically significant land in the disputed region. A change in authority or a change in power dynamics can be triggered by full-scale conflict. According to the claimant, China's current patrols and control over the area could lead to war between the parties. The US will have the chance to intervene in the war against China if it sends more troops.

Another facet of the regional geopolitical environment is the arms race that was sparked by the bordering states' dubious views on China's ascent and military advancements. Both peace and protracted conflict might result from the weapons race. The weaker state is shielded from the more powerful neighbor by the arms race and military improvements. The amassing of weapons could act as a deterrence, keeping the other side from wanting or starting an attack. Arms acquisition can promote stability and peace, but if a state's interests are ignored or not addressed, it can also lead to violence.

Through treaties and agreements with different states or as an ally of particular regimes, the United States has had a long-standing presence in the area. Its purpose is to obstruct China's rise and limit North Korea's aggression; for this reason, it has continuously presented a problem for China. The United States offers military and defense support to its friends and backs the states suing China. The United States will back any action against China, made possible by the militarization of the claiming governments, in the case of a little or large territorial dispute between China and other countries. Any aggressive or confrontational moves by China can be met by a response from the United States and its allies (Ali, 2021).

In the end, China's desire to annex Taiwan by force or exercise control over it could lead to conflict between Taiwan and China as well as between the US and other countries in the region. There are several elements in the area that could spark a brief dispute or turn into a full-scale fight. There are connections and shared interests among the states in the area. This is especially true in East Asia, where regional governments may best protect themselves against China's hegemony and threats through defense cooperation and extended security or deterrence offered by the United States (Yi-zhong heng, 2020).

### **3.3. Challenges for Global Security**

The reconfiguration of the geopolitical order, as well as understandings of security, was associated with the disbanding of the Cold War. Protecting the state has changed to include dilemmas that go beyond the classical state centered dilemmas: international crime, climate change, mass migration, smuggling and food security. Therefore, the contemporary conceptions of security revolve around the concept of human security instilling upon it the political, social, and economic aspects of human welfare. Amidst this broad agenda, a set of interlinked issues of gender oppression, and migration pressures, demographic change, environmental degradation, human rights abuse, and ethnic conflict, take a special place.

The Asian-Pacific region which has witnessed a high level of diversity and population concentration provides an example of these tendencies. Due to its layered history of culture and structural weaknesses, rivalry and cooperation patterns among state and non-state actors have developed in a complex way. There has indeed been

unprecedented continuity in post-1945 peace but this has co-existed with occasional flare-ups of hostility that have threatened internal security and also regional stability. In addition, the spread of globalization has escalated the local imbalances to transnational security issues. Vital sea routes through which much maritime trade passes, energy-rich waters of the South and East China seas, and the geopolitical competition between external powers (notably the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea) all indicate that the region has become a focal point in the manifestation of global power politics.

There are a lot of things that could not only threaten the peace and safety of the region but also the peace and safety of the whole world. Some of the things that could threaten security or world peace can be talked about under the following headings.

### **3.3.1 The Korean Peninsula**

The security threat on the Korean peninsula is currently the most pressing issue in need of immediate and permanent intervention by the international community, as highlighted in the current evaluation. This diplomatic and strategic support between China and the United States with regards to the interrelationship between the Northern and Southern regions of the peninsula has predisposed a potential crisis. The increase in the status of North Korean military, nuclear program and aggressive behaviour towards the United States and its major allies- Japan and South Korea has created a lot of policymakers concern both within the United States and among the allies. The objective of denuclearizing North Korea, of which the Americans see as a desirable objective, but the Chinese have a negative viewpoint of the same policy framing it as similar to those

territorial claims in the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan issue, has the effect of encouraging North Korea and enlivening its acts of military display. The rhetoric and actions of Kim Jong-un have elicited a lot of anxiety in South Korea and Japan and this has triggered increased military dependence and strategic modernization by the two states in the face of hypothetically imagined attack under the patronage of United States.

Due to the fact that major world players- the U.S., China, Japan, South Korea among others- are involved either directly or indirectly through alliances and treaties, the destabilization of the regional balance of power will trigger a broad-spectrum conflict which has the potential of expanding beyond the peninsula to include Japan and may ultimately tend to degenerate into a global confrontation. That is why, the Korean question has a tacit ability of triggering war on the peninsula and in Japan, and at the same time fuelling tensions between the United States and China, and thus potentially leading to a war with the world scale.

A second, no less important aspect is the impoverished north Korean population and the possibility of the radical change of regime having a tremendous effect on the neighboring countries. A fast disintegration or peaceful reunification can be considered as the possible resolution of the Korean issue (Casarini, 2018). A rapid collapse of North Korea would mean the displacement of large numbers of people across the peninsula into South Korea, China, Japan and Russia consequently undermining the national security of these countries because of the sudden influx of large number of refugees. The policy of a post-collapse might also involve armed action by its internal forces to accomplish favorable conditions of a possible reunion or a future dispute resolution. Besides, some of the stipulations in the 2007 accord, to be precise, the funding of two light water



nuclear reactors, are of grave concern to South Korea since the realisation of such obligations can be cost prohibitive.

In such a situation, North Korea will be in a position to regain the capabilities of nuclear weapons endangering the regional stability and prompting a faster pace of nuclear arms race as countries will invest in having real weapons to enhance deterrence and provide national security. Interestingly, the consequences of this state of affairs on international organizations like the Non-Proliferation Treaty organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency and indeed the proliferation nexus in a broader sense are crucial. The Korean peninsula is however always a hotspot which has the potential of causing major conflict in the region that spills across East Asia.

### **3.3.2 China and Taiwan**

One major issue endangering international peace and stability is the sovereignty conflict between China and Taiwan. Some geopolitical circumstances could spark a global conflict that could spread like wildfire. China increased tensions during Taiwan's 1996 presidential election by holding massive military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, which is located in Taiwan's border region. It is challenging to determine China's objectives. While some analysts foresee a protracted campaign of limited military intervention, others view such a direct move as unfeasible and dangerous for China, while still others think that China may seek to intervene militarily. China-Taiwan acrimony in recent months, along with the Biden administration's deployment of its first aircraft carrier across the Taiwan Strait, demonstrate the deteriorating relationship between China and Taiwan and the US's intention, anticipating a possible provocation (Affairs, 2018).

### **3.3.3 The South China Sea and the East China Sea**

The South and East China Seas have seen a rise in territorial and maritime border disputes, especially with regard to the Spratly, Paracel, and Senkaku Islands. The region's features, particular regions, or full territory are claimed by six rim states.

The issue of territorial disputes in two major East Asian regions is a major and urgent cause of conflict that has attracted significant attention from politicians worldwide. Because of their oil and gas deposits, fishing potential, and crucial sea lanes for trade and communication, these islands are strategically, politically, and economically significant. Many worries and skepticism about China have been sparked by government claims and China's forceful activities, which include the building of artificial islands and regional surveillance missions. China's rise and military modernization have exacerbated the mistrust, leading claimant and regional states to seek military advancements, which has led to an uncontrollable arms race in the area. Japan is motivated to improve its military capabilities and look for American help for its defense and claims because of the serious territorial, feature, and boundary disputes between China and Japan in the East China Sea. Therefore, the conflict over the two islands adds to the regional arsenal, and this arsenal may be the trigger for a major and frightening military conflict.

### **3.3.4 Internal Armed Conflicts**

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) 1997 annual report, four of the world's thirty most significant armed conflicts are becoming more intense in the Asia-Pacific region. There are violent wars in the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Myanmar. All of the armed adversaries in the

region are not represented by the wars listed here, even if they only make up a small percentage of the numerous ongoing conflicts. Diverse groups may provide financial and material support to the violent conflicts and the involved factions, and they may exploit these circumstances for their own purposes by claiming regional, linguistic, religious, or ethnic distinctions. In Pakistan, there was clear evidence of the financing and deployment of Central Asian groups, especially Tajiks, for insurgency against the government. Likewise, India backed and employed the Tamil Tigers as a team against Sri Lanka. Conversely, militant organizations may associate with anti-state organizations or ideologies and wage a proxy war against a particular nation. Their internal conflict may impede trade, commerce, and the oil supply, as well as any other transportation activity in the area, thereby endangering sea communication lines and regional stability.

### **3.3.5 Trend of Military Involvement in Business and Arms Proliferation**

Over the past decade, there has been a notable transformation in the outlook and posture of military forces in the region. The role of these militaries has expanded, encompassing not only security but also substantial engagement in nonmilitary or defence activities, including economic and service-related functions. The prolonged presence of military forces has significantly hindered local civilian businesses and financial activities. Trade and commerce under military influence benefit from monopolies, subsidies, tax exemptions, and special privileges that are not accessible to local enterprises, leading to issues such as corruption, crime, and tax evasion. Consequently, the military's influence in both regional and domestic politics has surpassed that of civil political authorities, in addition to the growth of military-owned enterprises and capital. This facet of the military presents a security challenge for the

region and global peace, as an aggressive foreign policy and interactions in defence and military matters may pose significant obstacles to maintaining peace.

### **3.3.6 Chinese Rise and Military Modernization and Regional Capabilities**

With the implementation of a military modernization program, China's defense and military expenditures is increasing significantly. Within the next 20 years, China's defense spending may surpass that of the United States, establishing China as a peer rival to the United States. Without US assistance, the regional governments are unable to independently oppose any Chinese moves; as a result, if Chinese influence and interests are impeded, China will not think twice about using coercive power, possibly starting a fight in front of the USA. It is crucial to understand that when China and the USA engage in combat or escalation, the conflict will not be limited to a certain region but will instead take place over the entire world. As a result of China's rise, other countries—including Taiwan, South Korea, and particularly Japan—are modernizing and improving their militaries, which is causing a major shift in their foreign policy. Alongside this, there is a significant expenditure in the upgrading and procurement of military hardware. Even in the case of a minor confrontation, the probability of an arsenal being deployed rises after it is accumulated.

Even while China's military might may not soon be on par with that of the United States, it has a strong presence in the area and, as a result of its influence, controls most of the maritime routes, islands, and other geographical features. It will quickly gain more strength and control, and the eventual course of action may involve deciding Taiwan's future and more. Improvements in relations between China and Taiwan won't accomplish anything unless the core issue of Taiwan's future status as a separate country

or a single, sovereign part of China is settled. Until then, disagreements over the islands and relations across the strait will continue to exist and could take many different forms, such as blockades or direct invasions. The way the US responds to the aforementioned problem will be crucial.

Taiwan's cession would be stopped by the USA, and US leaders would consider a range of options, including indirect assistance and direct defense. While lessening the effect of land-attack missiles, direct defense is feasible and might successfully thwart Chinese dominance in the air or sea. However, given China's highly developed military, the suggested approach might actually work because it will weaken American capabilities. China will eventually improve its cyber, anti-access, and anti-satellite capabilities, which might interfere with US command and control and intelligence systems and make direct defense more difficult. As a result, Chinese military forces in the area can prevent any attacks or strikes, enabling them to function freely and remove any barriers, which could lead to a major nuclear war in the region.

### **3.3.7. Managing Escalation and Retaliation**

The strategy underscores deterrence through strength and alliance-building, but it also raises the risk of escalation in crisis scenarios. For instance, increased U.S. naval presence and arms sales to Taiwan may provoke retaliatory measures from China, heightening tensions without a clear de-escalation mechanism in place (Mastro, 2020). This creates a strategic paradox while the U.S. aims to prevent aggression, its actions may inadvertently push adversaries toward aggressive posturing or asymmetric retaliation, including cyberattacks or economic coercion (Hiebert, 2022).

Furthermore, the U.S. lacks a comprehensive escalation management framework with some Indo-Pacific powers, especially those not aligned through formal alliances. Unlike NATO, where escalation control protocols are well-established, the U.S. faces ambiguity in crisis management with countries like China and North Korea. This increases the risk of miscalculation or unintended kinetic conflict (Grossman, 2022).

The effectiveness of managing escalation under the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy will largely depend on credible deterrence, transparent communication channels, crisis hotlines, and regional risk-reduction mechanisms. Without these, the region remains vulnerable to rapid escalation and reactive retaliation undermining the strategy's core aim of maintaining a "free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific" (White House, 2022).

The popular wisdom understands that the state elites are especially sensitive to the possible decapitation attacks of the leadership, but this field has not been so theoretically developed in the Chinese studies. In both cases, the historical performance of Beijing supports the existence of a complex monitoring of the extraterritorial threats to regime survival and of a tendency to take aggressive actions in defense when United States or its allies seem to call into jeopardy endangering interests that are crucial.

Moreover, the complexity of managing escalation is amplified by the presence of multiple actors with diverging security perceptions and doctrines. While the U.S. often views its Indo-Pacific presence as stabilizing, regional adversaries may interpret such moves as containment or encirclement, prompting strategic countermeasures. China's rapid militarization of the South China Sea and frequent incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) are examples of how perceived U.S. assertiveness

can lead to calibrated, yet escalatory, responses (Zhang, 2021). In such an environment, even minor incidents such as a naval collision or airspace violation could trigger a chain of unintended consequences. Therefore, the U.S. must complement its strategic posture with sustained diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures (CBMs) to avoid crisis escalation. Without parallel diplomatic initiatives, military dominance alone may not prevent retaliation, but rather, may provoke it in increasingly unpredictable ways (Kuo, 2023).

### **3.3.8 Security of the Sea Lane of Communication**

The integrity of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) security is seriously threatened by the hostile and turbulent political environment as well as the interactions between regional and external entities like China, Taiwan, Japan, the United States, South Korea, and North Korea. The 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) established freedom of navigation as the strategic foundation for this bilateral international trade. However, the growing maritime security problem in the region, which is influenced by political and economic interdependence, highlighted the necessity of collaboration for the protection and control of these water lanes. Regional states and other stakeholders with substantial interests must acknowledge the glaring lack of genuine cooperation and integration among themselves in light of the non-military issues of piracy, accidents, and oil spills as well as the military issues of mining, territorial disputes, and Chinese involvement in the South China Sea. This is especially relevant to the process of expansion and growing integration in North America and Europe. The ASEAN members acknowledge the necessity of a comprehensive security framework

capable of instituting security protocols and averting potential future conflicts within the region. Southeast Asian nations' growing concern about a range of maritime issues, such as offshore resources, maritime trade, fishermen's rights, maritime laws, and safety and environmental problems, illustrates the importance of the marine environment to these nations. The transition to maritime defense capabilities is another example of this.

According to a current regional analyst, the growth of sea power has reclaimed its place in the strategy priorities, outweighing the importance of the country's defense capabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the ensuing extension of state jurisdiction over the marine territory and resource are largely responsible for the resurgence of interest. By 1993, 58 nations had reportedly ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which had been in effect since December 8, 1992. The Fourth ASEAN Summit, which was held in 1992, officially established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). During this event, the ASEAN heads of state and government had the chance to express their desire to improve external communication on political and security issues, show cooperation with states in the Asia-Pacific region, and emphasize the importance of good governance. The initiative ushered in a new age of peace, stability, and collaboration in Southeast Asia rather than continuing as a minor milestone.

### **3.3.9 Arms Race and Military Up-gradation**

The modernisation of the armed forces of China done in modern times, and given the growing capabilities as well as the increasing spendings, coupled with a more aggressive attitude in line of territorial claims and control over contested territories, has led to an arms race in East Asia. This arms race has been augmented by the American



giveaways of financial support, as well as the military support to Japan and South Korea and is meant as a response to the threat of China and North Korea. Although such measures enhance collective security and provide regional players with a feeling of deterrence and protection, at the emergence of any conflict, there is always the likelihood of these states to utilize their so-called weapon system silos against themselves. This has resulted in a critical threat to the regional and thus global security and stability in cases where there has been a rush to increase the capabilities of the military and escalate the arms race.

#### **3.3.10 US Presence and Allies**

From a geographical and security perspective, the region has become more unstable due to the United States' presence there, which was genuinely intended to control the South-South Corridor (SLOC) in order to contain North Korean aggression, counter and contain the rise of China's political and military power, and control or check the country's developing economy. If China faces any challenge to its ascent or interests, it will react more forcefully. Similarly, the aforementioned governments will respond to any violation of US, South Korean, or Japanese interests by claiming US assistance. Therefore, the United States' presence alongside its most significant US allies puts the region's stability in jeopardy (Kulacki, 2021).

## **CHAPTER-4**

### **4. CONCLUSION**

East Asia is significant to the regional powers because of its topography and geology. The place is very perplexing and challenging due to the symmetrical placement of the water bodies and the shape of the landscape. The region is strategically, commercially, and economically significant. It also has significant islands with abundant oil and gas deposits in China's two seas. The rise of China's economy and military has compelled the world's most powerful nations to intervene in regional affairs in an effort to curb Chinese influence and power on the regional and global stage. The international organizations consider maritime communication routes to be a significant policy issue. By controlling the sea lines of communication in the area, the US also plans to monitor and control not only the Chinese economy but also global trade and other marine operations. More than half of the business and oil activities in the region are supported by excellent maritime communication routes.

The most powerful country in the region, China has been in charge of important political and economic facets of the region, including significant islands in the South and East China Seas and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). China has upgraded and expanded its military capabilities and adopted a muscular and assertive stance in the area. The group has made significant investments to increase its maritime presence by deploying guided missile destroyers, aircraft carriers, and submarines to extend its influence into nearby waterways. China's aggressive actions can be interpreted as an active display of those so-called gray zone operations or measures, which are not

formally regarded as acts of war but will nevertheless put pressure on its adversaries over their conflicting claims. This includes unilateral fishing restrictions, dredging of artificial islands, and the deployment of maritime militias.

The significance of the South and East China Sea has not been limited to the regional powers to support their arguments on the islands only but has attracted other players. However, the Chinese proactive and aggressive approach to the claims can be illustrated by the construction of fake islands, drilling along the claimed disputed areas and patrolling the zone by creating an air defense recognition zone. Besides, the rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration as directed by China against the Philippines of ruling in accordance with UNCLOS has aggravated the situation further and weakened the global legal procedures.

This has caused the regional states to be quite concerned and furious especially as they have had to modernize their armies in counter to the rise of China and its military build-up. Similarly, Japan and South Korea remain guaranteed of security and protection through their tie in their linkage with the US which security is serving own interest of making use of the presence of the US in the region. The US has permanent sizeable military bases in Okinawa and South Korea and its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) are a common practice that disputes Chinese maritime claims. Such commitments do not only promise regional allies but also a balancing tool to counter the Chinese.

The other strategic element in the area that carries a significant influence in the security and politics of the region is the Korean Peninsula. The security issue has been a

problem in the world due to the nuclear weapons program of North Korea and the attempts made by the US to abort it and ensure that it does not spread. North Korea blindly is developing a nuclear program. It has achieved a lot of success in conducting its nuclear bombs in the region and it is currently in possession of intercontinental ballistic missiles that puts the safety of Japan, South Korea, and the US in jeopardy. Korean peninsula is the other significant region of the region. North Korea requires the assistance of the US and China in order to disarm its nuclear arms but this does not seem feasible at the moment since both nations are struggling to attain power and influence. The Korean problem will either result in failure of both Koreas or they join in which is a security threat in both scenarios.

Furthermore, there is also a large influx of heavy weaponry and military infrastructure as the states are lobbying the realization of an arms race and military modernization in the region. One and half of the latter are counter-responses to threat posed to them by China and North Korea and the other half are counter-reactions to the acquisition of military equipment by their competitor in the region. Majority of the states are either upgrading or modernizing their navies, air forces and army and purchasing a lot of weaponry, ships and planes. One way to ensure the safety of the jets, helicopters, aircraft carriers, and destroyers is by ordering the latest and the best in the market. The escalating military expenditure has seen academics term the region of East Asia as engaging in a typical situation of a security dilemma where the actions of one state as a way of safeguarding through security deployments and facilities elicit reciprocal heroic actions by the others leading to this constant mistrust and militarization.

It is also evident that the safety of SLOC was quite critical and that the world economy could not function without people passing through the region. Hence, the security and safety of SLOCs will never be on the safe side and there is no assurance that the region will ever be calm. This region requires that the regional powers i.e., the US and China share cordial and pleasant relationships and collaborate on critical areas, including SLOCs security. When this is not fulfilled, the safety of the world maritime trade and the economy is threatened. This challenge to economy of the world and oil supply will remain as long as there is rivalry between US and China and their constant bickering over SLOC. Analysts have proposed confidence-building measures, multilateral dialogues, and coordinated exercises of countries navies to reduce chances of mis-calculations, which is only effective when mutual trust and compromise exists at the present time.

The US is also found in the region as a friend of Japan, South Korea and the Philippines which complicates things to China. The US supports the opponents of China regarding territorial conflicts as well as those of Taiwan. Similarly, the US also supports its governments of the South and East China Sea. Thus, the US presence in the region with the purpose to conquer communication lines at the sea, strategic important islands, and restrain China during its rise and modernization of the armed forces is no good to peace in the region. Due to its distinct and valuable characteristics, East Asia is gradually turning out to be the center of world politics. Significant wars in the world are bound to occur there within the following decades. The absence of de-escalation and diplomatic interactions will likely turn the region into the focus of the new cold war, a move that will

have disastrous consequences not only on Asian peace but on international stability and economic security as well.

The growing importance of East Asia to global politics cannot be divorced of the bigger geopolitics battle between China and the United States. The two are engaged in a strategic rivalry which no longer solely consists of economic leverage but it has in fact spread to security, technology and even ideology. Washington perceives China as regionally (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) and globally (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, RCEP) consolidating its power by means of the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The United States has responded by intensifying its Indo-Pacific Strategy, renewing alliances, and reinforcing the mini-lateral groupings like the Quad (the US, Japan, Australia, and India). The initiatives are aimed at providing a counter-to-Chinese-led development models and are meant to re-engage the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Therefore, East Asia has become the main stage on which this systemic rivalry is occurring.

Furthermore, regional organizations and multilateral institutions have been quite limited in their possibilities to exercise mediation of emerging tensions. The association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has always been accused of low levels of cohesion and ineffective enforcement mechanisms despite the fact that they are at the center of regional diplomacy. Its policy of non-intrusion and collective decision making has curtailed its ability to handle controversies convincingly like the claims by China over the South China Sea. On the same light, fora such as east Asia summit and ASEAN regional forum have not rendered agreeable treaties that have the potential to minimize the threat

to war. This institutional liability wins the need of the new and stronger security architecture in the regions, which should engage all stakeholders, encourage the transparency of military operations and develop crisis communication and crisis management mechanisms.

East Asia is at a crossroad. These options presented by regional states, which could be joining one of the major powers, balancing between two opponents, or attempting strategic autonomy, will define the future of regional order. The example of the emergence of a multi-vector foreign policy can be observed in such countries as Vietnam and Indonesia, which strive to avoid being involved as not to expose national interests. Nonetheless, the risk of unintentional confrontation, miscalculation and strategic competition is in the enduring bin, especially in disputed maritime areas. Unless these tensions are contained, they can grow to open hostilities that have world reactions. Hence, confidence- building measures, preventive diplomacy and inclusive regional dialogues are urgently required with focus on de-acceleration rather than domination. Without such efforts, East Asia can shift to the center of geopolitical crisis instead of the main shaft of the global development.

The geopolitical terrain of East Asia is intimately coupled to its geo-strategic inheritances viz. its archipelago topography, choke-points, and geo-strategic conflicts over the seas. What separates the South and East China seas is not the geographical capacity to be the gateways to the world economy, but the sites of strategic competition where sovereignty claims, naval positioning and economic interests overlap. These maritime areas are not only about resources extraction or Ice-on shipping status; it is

about power changes in the multi-polar world order. These seas are also complex when it comes to their bathymetrical nature and with a mixture of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the environment presents ideal conditions that trigger an uncertain aspect of jurisdiction and such matters make it exceedingly strained to settle diplomatically. In this way, East Asia maritime geography can be seen as a lever of geopolitical activities as well as a source of flashpoints, a place where the interests of major powers meet the fears of regional actors.

At the same time the militarization of strategic waterways has led to an arms race that can be characterized as a classical Thucydidean trap wherein the hegemon (the United States) and the challenger (China) is placed on an inevitably heading course towards war. The expansion of advanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, hyper-sonic missiles and cyber warfare capability in East Asia worsen the fragile security calculus. There is a shift in military doctrines as deterrence is transitioning to the denial-based deterrence method and transitioning to the punishment-based deterrence new method; this change indicates the worsening of the threat perceptions on both sides. Even seemingly defensive actions are seen through the lens of zero sum game in such an environment which creates suspicion and further destabilizes the environment. And the specter of inadvertent escalation looms given the absence of a viable arms control regime as well as regional crisis management framework.

What is more, the securitisation of economic tools has made East Asia a conflict zone over the issue of techno-economic victory. Weaponizing of supply chains, semiconductor embargo and prohibition of dual-use technology increasingly make trade



relations become weapons of coercive statecraft. The policies of indigenous innovation and civil-military fusion strategy adopted in China plus United States policy of decoupling and reshoring technology have polarized the technology influence in the world. In the meantime, middle powers including South Korea and Taiwan, find themselves walking the tightrope that has become even more dangerous to walk as the great power competition has become all the more intense. With economic mutually constitutiveness seeing a gradual politicisation, the possibility of economic disintegration of the global economy has also increased, leaving East Asia in an undesirable state at the heart of this techno-strategic division.

Finally, strategic landscapes are complicated further by the normative competition of governance over the region. Values, not just norms, with competing visions e.g., China promotion of hierarchical community of common destiny set against U.S. order of liberal rules-based international order brings different assumptions about elements of sovereignty, security, and legitimacy. The ideological difference between the paradigms is the source of a wider epistemic conflict over the way of creating and sustaining regional order. Failure to reach an agreement on normative frameworks has rendered multilateral diplomacy paralyzed and lowered the trust in international legal institutions. To prevent the possibility that East Asia would devolve into systemic disorder, it will be necessary to nurture a hybrid architecture that would manage asymmetries of power and normative inclusivity: an architecture whose accommodation of pluralism does not surrender to revisionism. Such innovation is necessary, because, otherwise, the region will be at risk of becoming the source of a long-term and perhaps irreversible balkanization of the international system.



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