



RESEARCH PAPER

Implications of US-China Competition in the South China Sea for Regional Security: A Multidimensional Analysis (2013–2024)

¹Sajjad Ahmad, ²Dr. Imran Wakil and ³Dr. Ghulam Mustafa

1. PhD Scholar, Department of International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor (OPS), Department of International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: imranwakil@gcuf.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The construction of China's artificial islands between 2013 and 2018 resulted in over 3200 acres of land militarization with runways and missiles. The US actions included the revival of the Quad in 2017 and AUKUS in 2021 and defence agreements with the Philippines. These incidents escalated like the 2023 conflicts over Second Thomas Shoal, with power transition theory indicating future escalations as China asserts its challenge to US supremacy. The research shows that current territorial claims are a result of selective historical understandings due to power struggles between China and the US. The results demonstrated that China's pursuit of strategic depth and its historical claims have driven the United States to balance against China while China has responded with persistent gray zone activities that stopped short of outright war. The article presents economic interdependence as an important factor that now enjoys restricted capacity to stop political and normative divisions between countries. The data for this qualitative research used for analysis came from trade flows between countries and maritime.

KEYWORDS Implications, Competition, Regional Security, Multidimensional Analysis, South China Sea & US-China

Introduction

The South China Sea covers an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometers and is bordered by China Taiwan the Philippines Malaysia Brunei Indonesia and Vietnam. The area functions as a crucial route which enables global trade and fishing activities and the transportation of energy resources but multiple nations assert claims over its territorial rights to various features including the Paracel Islands Xisha Qundao Spratly Islands Nansha Qundao Pratas Islands Dongsha Qundao Macclesfield Bank Zhongsha Qundao and Scarborough Shoal Huangyan Dao. The current territorial disputes exist because they relate to political battles which have persisted through various historical periods.

Scholars reach a general agreement that pre-modern activities could not satisfy the requirements needed to establish sovereignty according to international law when they assess historical claims which draw on ancient practices and colonial legacies and post-colonial claims. The article studies the development of these disputes through seven historical periods which include ancient times, pre-colonial times, colonial times, post-World War II times, the 1970s to 1990s period, early 21st century diplomatic efforts, and the US-China rivalry which began in 2013 and will continue until 2024. The study shows how historical events have become instruments of power competition through its combination of realist power competition theories and constructivist narrative creation

theories and liberal legal system theories. The analysis uses primary sources from dynastic annals and colonial records together with secondary literature to show how security dynamics have experienced patterns of continuity and rupture. (Hayton, 2021; Kaplan, 2014).

Literature Review

Alenezi (2024) offers a theoretically explicit and structurally grounded analysis of US-China rivalry in the South China Sea (SCS) by applying the lens of offensive realism, most prominently associated with John J. Mearsheimer. The study interprets the U.S. “rebalance” or “pivot” to Asia as a rational response by a dominant power seeking to preserve regional hegemony in the face of China’s rapid rise. Within this framework, the South China Sea is treated as a strategically vital maritime space where competition is driven less by legal norms or institutional mechanisms and more by the imperatives of power maximization and survival in an anarchic international system. This perspective is highly relevant to the present thesis as it provides a materialist and structurally deterministic explanation for escalating rivalry and its implications for regional security.

Budiana and Budiman (2024) examine the South China Sea (SCS) dispute through the analytical lens of sovereignty dynamics, focusing on how competing interpretations of sovereignty underpin and intensify the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. Their study contributes to the growing body of literature that moves beyond purely material or military explanations of the SCS conflict by emphasizing the conceptual and normative dimensions of sovereignty, particularly in the context of maritime spaces governed by international law. This perspective is highly relevant to the present thesis, as it highlights how divergent sovereignty claims shape strategic behavior and directly affect regional security in Southeast Asia. The authors argue that China’s approach to sovereignty in the South China Sea reflects a broad and historically grounded interpretation, where territorial integrity, historical rights, and national identity are closely intertwined.

Vo, Nguyen, Tran, and Bui (2023) examine US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia with specific reference to the South China Sea (SCS), framing the dispute as a central arena where broader geopolitical competition between the two powers directly affects regional security. The authors argue that the SCS has evolved from a set of overlapping territorial claims into a strategic space shaped by intensifying US-China rivalry, driven by China’s growing maritime assertiveness and the United States’ efforts to maintain its strategic presence and normative leadership in the region. They highlight how China’s island-building activities, expansion of maritime law-enforcement forces, and diplomatic pressure have altered the regional balance of power, while U.S. responses such as Freedom of Navigation Operations, alliance strengthening, and Indo-Pacific strategic initiatives seek to counterbalance Chinese influence and reassure regional partners.

Yaşar (2025) analyzes U.S. policy in the South China Sea (SCS) from a geopolitical perspective, situating American engagement within the broader context of great-power rivalry and the strategic significance of maritime spaces in Asia. The chapter argues that the SCS constitutes a critical geopolitical corridor for global trade, energy flows, and military mobility, making it central to U.S. interests in preserving regional balance and preventing the emergence of Chinese maritime dominance. Yaşar highlights key elements of U.S. strategy, including sustained naval presence, Freedom of Navigation Operations, alliance strengthening, and the integration of the SCS into wider Indo-Pacific frameworks. Through this lens, U.S. policy is presented as a deliberate effort to counter China’s expanding influence and to maintain strategic access and deterrence in a region increasingly shaped by power competition.

Material and Methods

The article uses a qualitative single embedded case study design which follows the method defined by Yin in 2018 to study US-China competition in the South China Sea from 2013 to 2024. The research studies military-strategic interactions and normative contestation and regional hedging behaviors and global precedential effects through its main US-China competition research case study. The research study uses an interpretivist-constructivist research philosophy which combines realist and liberal theoretical frameworks to achieve detailed comprehension of power imbalances and security conflicts and norm degradation.

Data Sources

The research study uses official documents as primary sources which include US DoD China Military Power Reports and Chinese white papers and ASEAN communiqués and the 2016 PCA Award and coast guard laws and summit declarations. The secondary sources used for the research study are peer-reviewed articles and think tanks such as CSIS AMTI and Carnegie and RAND and Crisis Group, and other reliable news sources such as Reuters and The Diplomat, and other databases that provide EIA hydrocarbon estimates and SIPRI military spending and incidents data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, according to Braun & Clarke (2006), is the principal method for identifying and exploring recurring patterns, including security dilemma, normative polarization, and hedging strategies. Content analysis helps to quantify descriptive trends by measuring the frequency of incidents, capability measures, and keyword use in different discourses. Selective critical discourse analysis, according to Fairclough (2010), is applicable to essential texts, demonstrating the manner in which definitions of rules-based world order and historic rights to security create legitimacy but undermine their opposing groups. Trustworthiness Credibility is ensured by triangulation of sources and thick description; transferability, by clear boundaries of context; dependability, by analytical audit trail; and confirmability, by reflexivity and transparent procedures.

Results and Discussions

Ancient and Pre-Colonial Period: Intermittent Usage without Formal Sovereignty

The SCS has been a maritime crossroads since its founding, which dates back over 2000 years, owing to the ability of people in the region to navigate, fish, and trade. Chinese narratives which form the base of present-day territorial claims, describe how people discovered and exploited land during the Han Dynasty which lasted from 206 BCE until 220 CE. The *Yi Wu Zhi* (Records of Strange Things) presents accounts of maritime journeys while Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE) documentation describes their patrol operations. The Zheng He expeditions of the Ming Dynasty (1405-1433) established the SCS as a maritime territory which Chinese maps depicted as part of China's "South Sea" area according to Wang's 2015 research. The Qing Dynasty gazetteers show how Hainan fishermen traveled to the Paracels for turtle and salvage resources which they obtained during their seasonal resource collection trips, while the navy carried out patrols that included Admiral Li Zhun's 1909 expedition to raise flags and build markers according to Bonnet's research in 2012.

Vietnam uses its own historical records to demonstrate its territorial claims since the 17th century. The *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* records the Hoang Sa Flotilla's annual

dispatches under Nguyễn lords to harvest products and assert jurisdiction in the Paracels and Spratlys. The emperors Gia Long and Minh Mạng of the 19th century conducted territorial surveys while establishing stelae which included the Paracels in their territorial boundaries (Nguyen, 2012; Chemillier-Gendreau, 2000). The area functioned as a seasonal fishing territory for fishermen from the Philippines and Malaysia and Brunei, who followed the traditional fishing practices of the pre-colonial sultanates of Sulu and Brunei (Bonnet, 2012; Britannica, 2024).

International legal scholars maintain that the activities which exist as private activities that occur at irregular times and do not belong to any single person do not meet the definition of effective occupation which modern legal standards establish according to the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling. European maps from the 16th to 18th centuries depicted these features as empty territories which people did not claim because they treated them as dangerous shoals that existed without ownership (Granados, 2008; Hayton, 2021). The social construction of narratives today reveals how it helps in establishing territorial claims since China's historic rights frame portrays his imperial rule as ongoing, while Vietnam's framework focuses on territorial management controlled by the state and helps in establishing national identity in post-colonial countries.

Colonial Era and Early 20th Century: Introduction of Formal Claims

Colonial empires of European powers were used to settle border conflicts through establishing territorial claims through scientific land measurement and military presence in times of imperial competitions. France, which controlled Indochina (Vietnam), considered SCS as part of its colony due to guano deposits for fertilizers and strategic military stations. The naval surveys conducted between 1899 and 1909 mapped the Paracels, which became part of the administrative system in 1921. The 1930s saw France escalate its formal occupation activities when it protested Chinese operations by sending gunboats and announcing its Spratly island territory claims through *Journal Officiel* publications, which declared the islands as *terra nullius* and made them part of Cochinchina. The establishment of stations and garrisons on Itu Aba and Pattle Island occurred by 1938 (Ghani, et. al., 2017; Chemillier-Gendreau, 2000; Hayton, 2021).

The Republic of China (ROC) moved to express its opposition against French activities through its street protests and the publication of maps which displayed the islands located in Guangdong province (1935) with 132 documented features. The Council on Geostategy (2024) reported that the naval incapacity of the United States Army restricted its ability to implement maritime security operations. Japan's expansionism disrupted this: Japan occupied the Spratlys in 1939 and named them "Shinnan Gunto" for phosphate mining and military base construction while it extracted guano resources and built military bases until 1945 (Kreitman, 2023). Vichy France established post-war uncertainties through its decision to submit to Axis demands despite both ROC and France making formal protests (Granados, 2008).

The current time period shows a transition from common property use toward government control which international law developments exemplified by the Hague Conventions. Realism explains colonial claims as resource grabs amid power vacuums while liberalism identifies early attempts at legal formalization that established UNCLOS.

Post-World War II and the Emergence of Modern Claims

The current territorial disputes between countries became established because of decolonization efforts and their respective alliances during the Cold War. The 1943 Cairo Declaration and 1945 Potsdam Proclamation required Japan to return its occupied territories which created a situation that allowed competing claims to arise because of unclear SCS territorial borders. In 1947 the ROC published the nine-dash line which originally showed eleven dashes and covered approximately 90 percent of the SCS according to historical maps while neighboring countries protested this claim (Hayton 2021). The People's Republic of China (PRC) took control of this territory after 1949 and developed nine dashes as their official territorial boundary but Taiwan (ROC) continued to assert identical territorial rights. Vietnam (after the 1954 division) claimed that it maintained French territorial rights by continuing its control over the Paracels until China seized the islands in 1974 (USNI News 2013). The Philippines claimed Spratlys in 1956 through Tomas Cloma's "discovery," which became official in 1978 when Marcos signed Presidential Decree 1596 to create the Kalayaan Island Group (Batongbacal 2016). Malaysia (1979) and Brunei (1984) expanded their continental shelf claims according to UNCLOS rules which specifically applied to their exclusive economic zones (Valencia 1995). Realist frameworks explain this situation as countries using their power to control empty spaces that emerged after World War II while constructivism demonstrates how nations create their identities through anti-colonial stories which use the nine-dash line to show China's recovery from its "century of humiliation" period.

Escalation in the 1970s–1990s: Resource Discovery and Occupations

Oil discoveries in the 1960s to 1970s led to increased territorial disputes across multiple regions. China used the 1974 Paracel Battle to take over the islands from South Vietnam while establishing military bases on Woody Island according to Time report from 2016. Vietnam occupied Spratly territories after it became unified with South Vietnam but their forces fought against China during the 1988 Johnson South Reef Skirmish which resulted in 64 Vietnamese deaths. The Philippines occupied Thitu Island in 1971 while Malaysia took control of Luconia Shoals in 1983 and Taiwan has maintained its presence on Itu Aba since 1956 according to Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative report from 2015. The events at Mischief Reef in 1995 which saw China take over a territory claimed by the Philippines demonstrated the Chinese government used salami-slicing methods according to Valencia 2000. Resource estimates of 11 billion barrels oil and 190 Tcf gas created a military buildup because realistic approaches to energy requirements forced countries to develop strategic defense systems.

Early 21st Century: Diplomatic Efforts and Renewed Tensions

The 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on Conduct (DOC) established peace resolution procedures, but its non-binding character restricted its operational functionality according to Ha (2005). The 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff (China-Philippines) escalated tensions, which resulted in the Philippines initiating UNCLOS arbitration in 2013 according to Baviera (2012). The 2016 PCA ruling rejected the nine-dash line, deeming features non-EEZ-generating (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). China's rejection and continuous reclamation projects demonstrated defiance, while US FONOPs developed more intense operations according to Beckman (2016). The liberalism perspective considers diplomatic efforts through DOC/COC negotiations to hold potential, whereas the realism perspective observes that power imbalances create obstacles to successful outcomes.

Emergence of US-China Competition (2013–2024)

China started its island-building program in 2013 which resulted in the construction of 3200 acres of military bases that included airstrips and missile systems (CSIS AMTI, 2024). The United States responded to the situation through three major actions which included the Quad revival that occurred in 2017 and AUKUS establishment that took place in 2021 and EDCA expansion in the Philippines which started in 2023. The number of incidents increased through incidents such as the Second Thomas Shoal clashes that occurred in 2023 according to power transition theory which forecasts that Chinese actions will lead to increased conflict with United States hegemony (Allison, 2017).

Conclusion

The SCS disputes began with the shared ancient territorial usage, which developed into the contemporary sovereignty disputes because of the colonial and resource disputes and the great power rivalry. This usage of history, which is selective and biased, has resulted in the persistence of instability because one has to comply with the legal requirements instead of changing the history. The implementation of the UNCLOS must be done while both sides agree on the shared maritime heritage to ensure the de-escalation of the disputes in the future. The South China Sea has developed over the period 2013-2024 from the longstanding, yet relatively circumscribed, set of overlapping territorial and maritime jurisdictional disputes between China and the other claimants into the single most important arena of strategic rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China. This has developed from China's massive land reclamation and military development of artificial islands in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos.

The research proves that the competition functions through interconnected systems which strengthen each other. China has implemented a strategy that establishes effective control through actual territorial possession which includes building artificial islands that created more than 3200 acres of new land and implementing anti-access area-denial systems through its deployment of HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles and YJ-12 anti-ship cruise missiles and electronic warfare suites and through its continuous use of maritime militia and coast guard operations and through its establishment of administrative control which started in 2020 when it created Sansha City to govern disputed territories. The United States has conducted more than fifty Freedom of Navigation Operations since 2013 which continue until 2024 while it has developed new security partnerships through the revival of the Quad and the AUKUS submarine agreement and the trilateral US-Japan-Philippines and US-Japan-South Korea alliances and the expansion of defense ties through the 2023 establishment of four new EDCA sites in the Philippines and the US has positioned itself as the main defender of UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award against revisionist challenges.

The regional security situation faces extreme challenges that generate substantial instability problems. The military-strategic aspect demonstrates a traditional security dilemma which exists because both sides view each other's defensive moves as evidence of offensive military plans leading to an unending cycle of hostile responses. Gray-zone coercion below the threshold of armed conflict has become routine water cannon incidents laser illuminations dangerous intercepts vessel ramming and blockade-like tactics at Second Thomas Shoal while crisis-management mechanisms hotlines and INCSEA-style agreements remain under-institutionalised or poorly utilised. The absence of robust de-confliction arrangements together with increased operational activity from PLA Navy patrols and dual-carrier USN deployments and allied exercises creates a

situation which significantly increases the chances of miscalculation and accidental escalation.

The period has left behind its most lasting impact through the process of normative and institutional deterioration which now exists. China's complete denial of the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal Award which declared the ruling as "null and void" together with its ongoing activities that the ruling specifically prohibited has caused significant harm to UNCLOS mandatory dispute resolution mechanisms which depend on Annex VII arbitration. Permanent UN Security Council members who choose to follow only some of their ratified treaties create a situation where they enable other noncompliant states like Russia and Turkey to disregard international legal standards in order to pursue their goals. The resulting normative polarization between universalist "rules-based order" and specific "historic rights" and "community of shared future" has destroyed the maritime legal commons while making third-party ocean governance adjudication less credible.

The regional actors experience their most severe hedging challenges. The Philippines under President Marcos Jr. has decided to strengthen its alliance with the United States through three actions: it expanded EDCA, it developed trilateral summits, and it publicly used the Mutual Defense Treaty; Vietnam has established deeper security partnerships with Washington, Tokyo, New Delhi, and Canberra while maintaining its trade connections with Beijing; Malaysia and Brunei have used diplomatic methods to handle their maritime territory while increasing their maritime domain awareness patrol operations. The ASEAN institution has experienced its highest centrality loss because more than 20 years have passed since the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties yet the binding Code of Conduct remains unattainable because internal conflicts between pro-China Cambodia and Laos and maritime claimants have delayed progress and China prefers to conduct bilateral talks instead of following multilateral restrictions. The organization's ability to summon members has been damaged by both the ASEAN consensus deadlock and the power struggle between major nations which take advantage of ASEAN member states' internal divisions.

The fourth factor, which includes economic impacts and resource availability along with human-security effects, creates strategic instability through multiplying effects. The South China Sea carries US\$3–5 trillion in annual trade and roughly 30 percent of global crude oil transit; even temporary disruptions would generate immediate supply-chain shocks and energy-price volatility. Contested hydrocarbon exploration (Reed Bank, Vanguard Bank) remains stalled because coercive methods prevent progress while fisheries which used to supply 10 to 12 percent of the world's marine catch and serve as essential protein source for 400 million people, now face a 30 to 75 percent decline in catch-per-unit-effort because of overfishing and destructive practices and illegal fishing operations and the transformation of traditional fishing methods through military activities. Large-scale reclamation projects have destroyed coral reef ecosystems which has created food insecurity and livelihood risks for coastal communities who already face these challenges.

The South China Sea case establishes dangerous legal standards which extend beyond the regional boundaries of the area. The SCS area established three legal practices which all three cases use to establish their current positions: parties use historic rights to deny UNCLOS territory rights, they choose which rulings to follow and which to discard and they employ non-governmental maritime forces to support their territorial claims. Unrestrained imitation of historical legal changes will lead to the disintegration of global

maritime control established after 1982 into separate dominance areas instead of one worldwide system.

The study results show that all theoretical frameworks which include security dilemma power-balancing and power transition theory and constructivism and liberalism explain the study results, which provide permanent evidence. The hybrid framework which we selected shows better explanatory power because it accounts for the three interconnected processes which include material escalation, ideational polarisation, and institutional decay.

The main point of this research shows that US-China competition during the South China Sea conflict from 2013 to 2024 has created permanent security problems which disrupt regional safety because it created a dangerous security situation together with the destruction of maritime governance systems and the division of ASEAN and the increased economic and human threats and the establishment of new rules which endanger international ocean management systems. The probability of continued gray-zone coercion stays high at about 60 to 70 percent while the chance of accidental kinetic incidents remains at 20 to 30 percent and the possibility of escalation which connects to a Taiwan contingency or wider Indo-Pacific crisis stands at about 10 to 20 percent.

The present situation has not reached a state of irreversible occurrence. The two sides can build trust through their joint work on marine environmental protection and fisheries management and their work on humanitarian aid and disaster response and search-and-rescue missions. The implementation of military hotlines together with the development of voluntary guidelines for coast guard and militia operations and the establishment of a substantial Code of Conduct and the organization of an international conference for UNCLOS Article 121 island and rock designation and historic rights claim clarification provide organizations with practical options for their medio-term planning. Managed strategic competitive systems will need to develop into long-term de-escalation solutions which permit countries to control their territories but still allow for free navigation and third-party legal resolution processes.

The South China Sea dispute has evolved into a conflict which testing the international relations between major powers and the effectiveness of international law and the Indo-Pacific security situation. The future of this region depends on which path Washington and Beijing and Southeast Asian governments select in their upcoming decisions. The opportunity for preventive diplomacy continues to exist but it becomes less accessible with each passing moment.

As global interdependence deepens and multipolarity accelerates, the South China Sea conflict will determine both the security and prosperity of more than one billion people who live in the Indo-Pacific region. The post-Cold War maritime system, which established a cooperative rules-based order, will face its ultimate test through the South China Sea dispute. The stakes could scarcely be higher.

Recommendations

- The status of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the use of dialogue and conflict management platform in the South China Sea should be strengthened by regional states. The mechanisms initiated by ASEAN like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit can be used to ensure that the rivalry between the great powers does not degenerate into a conflict. The ability to make ASEAN stronger

will also diminish the external manipulation and make sure that the policies concerning the regional security are based on the common interests and not on the great power agenda.

- The ASEAN and China ought to agree on a binding Code of Conduct to govern the conduct of conduct in areas of contention in the waters. An authoritative framework would determine guidelines to the military operations, resource exploration, and sea behaviors, thereby lowering miscalculation and avoiding a build-up among the claimants and the foreign powers such as the United States. These systems are necessary due to the rising militarization of artificial islands and the rising naval patrols.
- The United States and China ought to increase military to military communication channel, crisis hotline, and maritime safety agreements. Such confidence-building activities as advance notice of military drills, maritime incident procedures, and communication between the commanders of warships may mitigate unintentional conflict situations in disputed waters that are often considered the area of operation of the naval and coastal guard ships.
- The states in the region such as the Philippines, Vietnam, the Malaysia, and Indonesia are advised to intensify their maritime collaboration, in terms of joint patrol, intelligence sharing and capacity building. The multilateral maritime cooperation will increase the resilience of the region to coercive actions, and enhance monitoring over unlawful fishing and maritime militia activities and grey zone tactics.
- Claimant states ought to seek common oil, gas, and fisheries exploration and development in contested regions, rather than intensifying the territorial disputes. Economic projects of the South China Sea can turn the area into a conflict zone to the platform of economic cooperation and building confidence.
- The Indo-Pacific should encourage university, think tanks and policy institutes to talk about maritime governance, security cooperation and conflict prevention. It is possible that academic diplomacy will assist in curbing the misconception and produce policy solutions toward dealing with strategic competition.

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